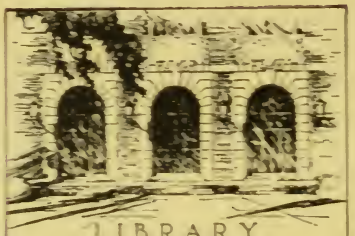

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THE SEARCH

FOR

BASIL LYNDHURST

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF

'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS,' 'ONLY THE GOVERNESS,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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THE

SEARCH FOR BASIL LYNDHURST

MISS SEFTON'S STORY

CHAPTER I.

CATHERINE SEFTON'S RETROSPECT.

'Seek not much rest, but much patience.'
THOMAS À KEMPIS.

'The graves grow thicker, and life's ways more bare,
As years and years go by;
Nay! thou hast more green gardens in thy care,
And more stars in thy sky.
Behind, hopes turned to griefs, and joys to memories,
Are fading out of sight;
Before, pains changed to peace, and dreams to certainties,
Are glowing in God's light.'
'*Lyra Mystica.*'

THERE is one lesson that I think we all learn better as we grow older, and that is submission to the discipline of life.

Youth is slow to comprehend the inevitable laws that govern human existence. They turn away their eyes with natural reluctance from the dangers and pitfalls that threaten their future peace. To-morrow is not to-day;

the present, so joyous, so strewn with flowers —that is sufficient for these thoughtless minds. Age, with its sad environment, is still far away in the misty distance—away with all these prophets of evil. 'Let us eat and drink!' Oh yes! is that not their light-hearted philosophy?

I thank the Fatherly Wisdom above that such things should be—that these children just entering upon life are so mercifully blinded, so pathetically ignorant of the difficulties and sorrows that will beset their path later on. But with us who are older it is different. What woman of forty-five—yes, it is I, Catherine Sefton, who ask the question—what woman of forty-five can look back on the years of her life without a sigh of regret, without a repressed shiver, as the shadows of the past seem to enfold her?

Ah! we know now what life means, as we look back over the years. There was work that we set about so gladly, so eagerly, and yet left unfinished; there were friendships that had been broken, promises unfulfilled, hopes that had been frustrated, good intentions that had come to an untimely end; those who had loved us had passed within the veil; others had disappointed us; where we had expected to find consolation we found vacancy. Who will not verify these words? Who has not experienced

this bitter discipline? Is it not written in the good Book, that 'through much tribulation——'? Well, can we not finish that sentence for ourselves?

But I am no pessimist. Like other women, I have kept my journal of mercies: I have had my glad times — my golden opportunities. When joy fled, Peace—tender and abiding—has taken me by the hand and led me gently on. Would you know what she whispered to me at the hour of my greatest desolation—when I parted with the man whom I honoured above all men? 'It is but for a time. This life—this antechamber, where the grown-up children learn their lessons; where they do their painful tasks; where the problems they are studying are not clear to their comprehension—this is but the beginning—the childhood of life: beyond is the real life, where all shall be solved, and the parted shall be reunited for ever.'

I had had much to try me. When I was quite young the burden of a sister's wrecked happiness had been laid on me—the daily and hourly responsibility of helping a weak, morbid nature to bear a trouble that seemed too heavy for it. I take no credit to myself for this; many a woman has had a like burden, and has borne it far more bravely than I. I loved Virginia; she was my only sister; but I was not always

patient with her. She had wrought her own woe. There were times when I would speak strongly to her of the duty of bearing more cheerfully the penalty of her own weakness. When I told her that no private grief should ever shadow the peace of a household, she would listen to me meekly. 'You are right, Cathy; you are always right,' that is what she would say to me. But the cloud never lifted; the next day it would be the same: the old sadness, the shrinking from strange faces, the want of interest, the self-absorbed, morbid depression; no, she could not help it, my poor Virginia; the poison had entered into her very being; her nature was not strong enough to rally; she was simply crushed.

Life could not be very gay at the Hall under these circumstances, but I had my own interests. I was proud of bearing an old and honoured name; the charge of our estates gave me plenty of active work; our tenants, the poor people round us, the ordering of our household, and the interchange of civility with our neighbours, filled up one busy day after another, and left me no time to think of my own happiness. If only Virginia would have worked too! but she was too spiritless, too much unnerved by her unhealthy broodings; after a time I had to leave her alone.

It has always been my opinion that a single woman should create her own interests and ties. I know that my affection for Olga brought much happiness into my life, and I grew almost to regard her as my adopted child; Jem was very dear to me, too, but he was not Olga.

I never knew any girl like her! She was not specially clever, nothing out of the common, but there was a freshness and sweetness about her, a sprightly sort of gentleness that entirely won my heart. Few young girls are restful. Olga was singularly so; her nature had no abrupt angles; there was a wonderful serenity about her; she had no moods; she was always just herself, simple, affectionate, unselfish.

I think the great secret of her charm lay in her complete unconsciousness; she never seemed to be thinking of other people's opinion; she wished to be loved, but she gave herself no uneasiness on the subject; her affections were very strong; she was capable of any amount of self-sacrifice for those she loved! Perhaps her chief danger lay in her sympathy for others, her generosity often out-stript her prudence; if she could help others, she was willing to run any risk herself.

I remember the little anecdote that Jem once told me of their childish days; it was so characteristic of Olga: she was ready now to

scorch herself in any good cause, to try her powers, to approach the impossible too closely! I could fancy her still crying out with childish petulance, 'Oh! Jem, it hurts!' for she was one who could suffer keenly. The one flaw in her character was a certain difficulty in understanding lower or more prosaic natures, in making allowances, in giving out her best to them; and yet when she really loved anyone it was marvellous how she overlooked their defects, how she gave them credit for fabulous virtues. I am thinking of Jem, who, after all, was not more romantic than other young men of his age.

But with poor Mr. Leigh it was different. Olga was never entirely just to him; even Jem told her so. A certain slowness of comprehension, a tedious mannerism, a few surface faults, blinded her to his excellences. I never knew a better man; as a clergyman, he was faultless, and his single-hearted loyalty to his frail, worn wife was touching beyond measure. To borrow an oft-used expression, he simply worshipped the ground she walked on.

I used to scold Olga sometimes when I was in a lecturing mood. 'It is always, Jem, Jem!' I said once, 'never Hubert; and yet what a good brother he is! Has he ever said a hard word to you?'

'No, never,' she replied quite meekly, for she knew she deserved my scolding.

'He is good as gold!' I went on; 'he never thinks of himself—you have often told me so; it is always his wife, or his children, or you, or Jem! he is so fond of you both, Olga.'

'Yes, I know,' looking very much ashamed of herself.

'And yet it is always Jem!—oh, I grant you Jem is charming; I like him better than any other young man of my acquaintance. He is a fine fellow—a very fine fellow—but he is not better than his elder brother.'

'Why should you compare them?' she asked reproachfully; 'they are totally different. Jem is Jem; and as for Hubert——'

'Well, what about Hubert?'

'Oh, he provokes me—he is so dense!—but, all the same, I am very fond of him. I am not like Kitty, perhaps, but, then, Kitty is his wife. If I had a husband I should swear by him, of course.'

And then the naughty child went off singing to herself, just as though I had made no impression on her; but I never lost an opportunity of speaking a good word for Mr. Leigh.

Virginia was very much attached to Olga—she always said that she was like a sunbeam in the house. Once or twice, when we were sitting

together in the long winter evenings, she would drop some word about her that I found it difficult to answer.

'We are growing old, Cathy,' she said once; 'and if we should never find Basil'—and then she looked at me meaningly—'if we should have to seek for an heir—and we should have none of our own flesh and blood—then there is Olga.'

I remember the sudden pang I felt when she first said this, and how the blood seemed to rush to my heart for a moment. Had it come to this? were we so poor, so deprived of all natural ties, that we must leave a neighbour to inherit our lands? Must the Seftons die out? Were we two lonely women the last of our race?

'We must find Basil,' I returned; and in spite of myself my voice faltered.

But Virginia was in one of her dark moods.

'Basil may be dead,' she whispered; and I shrank a little at her tone. 'How can we find my boy if they have buried him out of sight? We are growing old, Catherine, and who is to live here in our stead? is it to be Jem or Olga?'

'It is to be neither,' I exclaimed; I know I answered her with a sort of impatience. 'How do we know Basil is dead? and the property is his. I will not lose the hope of finding him.

You are his mother, Virginia; it is for you to hope too.'

'I think I am tired of hoping,' she returned, with a gentleness that simply exasperated me. 'I have hoped so long—and if he should be dead——'

I cannot explain how all this reiteration vexed me. It was only poor Virginia's way—her method of tormenting herself; but to-night it was simply unbearable. I flung away from the room as that last dreary sentence rang in my ears—'If he should be dead!'

Well, it might be so; Basil might be lying in his grave; but for all that, why should it be Olga—Olga, whom I so dearly loved, but who was not our own flesh and blood? We could remember her; oh yes, there were other ways of showing our affection—but what had she done that this rich inheritance should be hers? why should her simple, happy life be spoilt by all this weight and responsibility?

'It is not for Olga,' I said to myself; 'and yet to whom could it all go?' and as I asked the question, the thought flitted through my mind—a sudden memory of one who had been poor all his life, and had done good work with only a scanty reward; who had toiled and grown gray in his Master's service, without asking for His good things. Would not wealth

be of infinite use to such a one?—a talent, a glorious talent, to be spent for others; would not hundreds be benefited, as well as he?

I went about with this thought locked up in my breast for many a day, but I never spoke of it to anyone. Now and then Virginia would revert to the old subject—'If he should be dead,' but I always soothed her with the hope of a living Basil.

There was plenty of time; by-and-by, in a year or two, I might speak another name, that had not been mentioned between us for five-and-twenty years. Would Virginia think me mad? would she again plead Olga's cause? Time would show. Meanwhile the thought soothed me; perhaps one day it might all belong to Robert Fleming. It made me happier to think of this, and how he would care for all our poor people. Perhaps he might even take the name of Sefton, to please his long-lost friend.

I know few young persons would give a middle-aged woman credit for such romance; but the heart is slow in growing old, and I had a tenacious memory. I could have married over and over again, but I had never seen a man to compare with Robert. 'If it be not Robert, it will be no one,' I had cried to my father with passionate girlish despair; but he

had answered with an incredulous smile. Well, I had been right—it was no one.

Sometimes, when Olga looked at me in the innocent way that was natural to her, my whole heart seemed to go out to the child, but, all the same, I would say to myself:

'I am not wronging her—there will be plenty for her and Jem. She will not misjudge me, because when I had the power to make her a rich woman I withheld my hand—because I selected a faithful steward, and kept it all for him.'

No; I was not afraid of Olga. There was nothing mercenary in her nature; she loved us and was grateful to us for our kindness, but no speculation on the future ever entered her thoughts.

I was in this unsettled state of mind when the report reached us of Paul Lyndhurst's death. It came to us in a strange, roundabout way, and was terribly vague and unsatisfactory. He had been dead for years, but no one knew of the fact but a certain Père Lefevre, one of the clergy of l'Eglise de St. Sulpice at St. Genette.

Our hopes of ever finding our rightful heir Basil had by this time ebbed very low indeed, but as this faint clue reached us, it was wonderful how they revived again. When Virginia looked in my face with yearning eyes, but

without speaking, I knew what the words were that she left unuttered :

'You will go to St. Genette and see Père Lefevre. Perhaps on his death-bed Paul may have mentioned his son ;' and I answered as though she had really spoken :

'Yes ; I will go.'

In my own heart, I was glad that any action was possible ; all these years there had been nothing that I could do. How could I have left Virginia to search for Basil ? But now, when she bade me go, I could leave her with a clear conscience.

But I did not know what need there would be of patience, or of the long weeks of waiting that lay before us. At first I chafed sadly at the delay, but a letter from Virginia reassured me.

'Yes, it is hard,' she wrote ; 'but I am used to disappointment ; and you must not trouble so much about me. It is needless to say how I miss you—the faithful sister who has become a necessity to me ; but though the Hall is empty without you, Cathy, I would not have you back for worlds. Stay where you are, and let us both try to be patient. You have Olga ; the dear child will not let you be dull. No ; you must not come back until you can bring me word that I am a free woman, and that Basil—

ah! I dreamt of him last night: he held out his hand, and said "Mother," and I woke weeping for the very sweetness of the dream.'

After this I banished all uneasy scruples, and tried to enjoy our pleasant unconventional life.

I began to love La Maisonnette almost as much as Olga did. I liked our cosy salon, and the great bare salle-à-manger, with its open glass doors and shady coolness. Sometimes, as we sat at our meals, the chickens would peck at the crumbs beside us; Rollo used to watch them furtively, and growl from time to time, but he never dared to chase them away—only Jeanne would come clattering over the floor, and drive them off with loud protestations.

'One might as well dine in the poultry-yard!' she would say, with a toss of her head, as one cackling chicken after another fled into the courtyard. 'Poof! it makes one hot, too—the aggravating fowls!'

I must confess our neighbour at the pavilion interested me greatly, though I tried to hide this feeling from Olga. Indeed, it was for her sake solely that I did not make any overtures towards intimacy.

A girl is a serious responsibility, especially a warm-hearted, impulsive creature like Olga, who was capable of setting Mrs. Grundy at defiance if she could only perform a kind

action to a fellow-creature. In spite of her innate refinement, one found it very difficult to make her understand the little niceties and readjustments that are necessary in our intercourse with the other sex; her very innocence and kindness of heart made her bolder than other girls, and her unconsciousness added to the danger.

Judge my dismay, then, at finding an interesting young widower located at our very back-door—a widower, too, under very questionable circumstances, and evidently as poor as a church-mouse. Unknown to Olga, I had questioned Monsieur Perrot about his lodger, but his replies had been very unsatisfactory.

Monsieur was poor, certainly; he had affirmed the fact. He—Monsieur Perrot—was standing one evening at his door talking to madame, and cet jeune monsieur had addressed him. Madame wished to know how long ago. Well, perhaps a month or five weeks—a few days before madame had come to La Maisonnette.

'Not longer ago than that?'

Mais non, certainement; madame could verify the fact, for she came out and kissed le petit, who was asleep in monsieur's arms. Madame thought it was his little brother, but monsieur only smiled and shook his head. Then they had got into conversation, and

monsieur stated that he was looking for a lodging—some quiet place that was not too dear. Monsieur owned his poverty frankly :

'I have only a little,' he said in a bright sort of way ; 'when I have spent that, our holiday will be over. I want it to last as long as possible,' and then he had frowned as though some uneasy thought troubled him.

'And you offered him the pavilion, monsieur?'

'Well, it was madame's thought,' he returned, pushing his old blue velvet cap rakishly over one ear. 'She had fallen in love with le petit, and, indeed, he was a little angel of beauty.'

'If one might put a few things in the pavilion,' she said, and monsieur had caught at the notion at once. It was dirty and full of litter ; but, all the same, nothing had suited him so well.

'It is a hermitage,' he cried—'a lodge in a garden of cucumbers. Look at that sunset—those windows looking out on the apple-trees.' Ma foi, monsieur was easily contented. He and madame bargained over matters like two children—like chattering magpies. There must be a bed ; as for a bath, there was the bay ; but a table, even some chairs, were necessary. A stove—good ; he would have excellent coffee. The bread and the milk for le petit—nothing

was wanting. Dinner could be had at a restaurant. It would be a life after his own heart.

'Wake up, Reggie, and see thy new abode —the other edition of the old curiosity shop.'

Oh, it was droll to hear him, and to see le petit clap the hands! How interesting Olga would have found all this! but I dared not tell her. I dared not excite her sympathy and pity by describing the poor fellow's boyish transport at the sight of the bare-looking pavilion. There was a touch of poetry in those few words: 'Look at that sunset'—as though he habitually lived above his surroundings.

'We are ourselves in spite of our environment,' he had said to me as we walked together that afternoon from the market-place.

I found it difficult to forget that talk. It was the conversation of a man who had thought much and suffered much, and whose faith in humanity had become impaired. Every now and then there was a bitter, half-mocking speech that jarred upon me, as though under the boyish manner there lurked a hidden depth and undercurrent. I hardly know how to describe the impression it made on me. I felt as though I must take his hand and beg him to be silent: 'It is not so. There are yet good people in the world; high aims, lofty principles. Throw away this black pessimism, this garbage that no one

wants, and open your eyes to the better side of life ;' but he was a stranger, and I could not say this.

He interested me profoundly. Indeed, he was never out of my thoughts ; but, all the same, he repelled me. The dark intent face and cold gray eyes haunted me. I used to ask myself curiously whether I liked or disliked him ; for a long time I could not answer this question. I used to be sorry when Olga met him. The night of the accident I had an uneasy feeling when I saw him with her.

'Will you take my boy?' he had said to me quickly, almost peremptorily ; 'Miss Leigh has hurt her foot and is very faint ;' and then he had lifted her up as though she were as light as Reggie, and carried her into the house. 'She has been very brave, but the pain has been too much for her,' he said as he went to the side-board for cold water.

It struck me then, from his manner, that he had been used to illness—he was so quiet and helpful.

But in spite of my old-maidish scruples, there was no keeping Olga and Reggie apart. The child had taken a fancy to her. Every day we heard his little voice shouting to us to open the gate ; and then he would come bounding through it, and fling himself into her arms. It

was so pretty to see them together; Olga had such gentle winning ways with children.

I am sure that it was his gentlemanly instinct that kept Mr. Fleming at a distance—how strange he should have that name!—for he was very grateful to us for our kindness to Reggie; but, all the same, he did not wish for any intimacy. I have seen him avoid us more than once, or pass us with a bow, and I often begged Olga to be equally distant.

I was rather amazed, then, when I heard of the rencontre at the bathing-house; and still more so when she repeated her impulsive speech.

'Why am I so foolishly outspoken, Aunt Catherine?' she asked in quite a piteous voice. 'I mean to be so careful, and then the words somehow escape me. Jem is right—it is my own fault that I get into so many scrapes.'

'It is better to think before one speaks,' I replied with unusual severity; but really the child had been so foolish.

To my dismay she suddenly burst into tears.

'Oh, I am so ashamed of myself!' she cried; 'and you say nothing to comfort me. Mr. Fleming will think—oh! I do not know what he will think; but no one could have been kinder.'

'He will only think that you want to be

friends ; your little reproach meant nothing but that. Mr. Fleming is a man of the world ; he will not misunderstand a little bit of girlish pique.'

'You are making it worse,' she returned ; and I could see she was much put out. 'What business have I to wish to know any gentleman who shows so much reluctance to know me ? My pride ought to have prevented me from making such a speech ; but it was just his loneliness and unhappiness—oh, I am sure he is unhappy !—that made me long for us to be his friends. I thought how much good you might do him. But there, how often you have told me not to enact the part of Providence, and so I have brought this humiliation on myself.'

'But it is nothing—a mere nothing, my dear Olga. How can you exaggerate a few words ?'

'It is not a mere nothing to be misunderstood,' she replied with much dignity. 'Aunt Catherine, why do you not comprehend my meaning ? I am right to be angry with myself ; I made a foolish speech to a stranger ; I am glad I asked his pardon for my impertinence ; I am glad he answered me so kindly. My one hope now is, that I may never have an opportunity of speaking to Mr. Fleming again ;' and the dear child marched out of the room with her pretty little head as erect as possible.

Certainly I was right in saying Olga's impulsiveness would lead her into trouble. If Mr. Fleming had not been a gentleman—well, I know many a man would have taken advantage of that innocent little speech, and made it the basis for a lively flirtation.

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE NIGHT.

'Hast thou gone sadly through a dreary night,
And found no light;
No guide, no star, to cheer thee through the plain—
No friend, save pain?
Wait, and thy soul shall see, when most forlorn,
Rise a new morn.'

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTOR.

THE next morning, as we were sitting over our breakfast and reading our letters, I noticed that Olga changed colour, and knit her brows as though something disturbed her.

'Is Jem treating you to one of his fraternal lectures?' I asked, anxious to find out what was amiss.

'Jem writes rather strangely,' she replied in a very low voice. 'I think you had better read what he says;' and she laid down the letter before me, and went on with her breakfast. And then she added, a moment later:

'You see, I have always been accustomed to tell Jem everything. I like him to know all about my friends, and everyone; he is so sensible and sympathetic. I never knew him take notions into his head before.'

I made no answer to this. Before I read a word I understood that Jem disliked the idea of our new acquaintance, and I was right. The passage Olga pointed out to me was as follows:

'And now I want to say a word to you, and I hope Aunt Catherine will excuse my interference. I think that you ought be very careful before you pick up new acquaintances in that outlandish place. You are such a soft-hearted goose, Olga, and—begging her pardon—Aunt Catherine is not exactly what one would call a woman of the world'—what a rude boy!—'and I think you want someone to look after you both—you two poor unprotected females! Now, I do not half like the idea of this fellow at the pavilion—what in the world is a pavilion?—he does not seem altogether square. I think you said his name was Fleming; try and find out his Christian name. There was a man of that name at Exeter—before my time, of course—who was the tip-top of all the riff-raff there, and who did not bear the

best of characters. I think his name was Gerard, or Bertram ; I can find out which. He was confoundedly clever, and all that—that kind of fellow always is—but he made a mess of his career by marrying beneath him. I think the girl was in some shop ; but nobody knows exactly, only he vanished as though the earth had swallowed him up. Now, I don't say this man is your hermit of the pavilion, but it looks uncommonly like it, and if you will take my advice you will have very little to do with him. You may show this to Aunt Catherine if you like, for she is a sensible woman, and will not mind my taking the liberty of cautioning you both. Write again soon.

'Your affectionate brother,

'JEM.'

I hardly knew what to say as I handed the letter back to Olga. It had made me desperately uncomfortable. I did so hate suspecting people.

'Jem may be right, you know ; he is very sharp. He has all the makings of the future lawyer about him.'

To my alarm, Olga burst out with a passionate remonstrance.

'I call that too bad, Aunt Catherine. You

are condemning Mr. Fleming without proof, just because Jem chooses to interfere and make ridiculous statements. That is quite a version of "Give a dog a bad name, and hang him!"'

'My dear Olga!'

'Many young men have been wild at Oxford; but they have turned out very well for all that, and he may have repented of his follies. Why should we refuse to make any allowances for him?'

'You think, then, that Jem's Mr. Fleming is the same as ours?'

'It looks very much like it,' she returned reluctantly. 'You surely remember, Aunt Catherine, that he told you that he had been at Exeter? I am afraid that corroborates it. He may even have married beneath him——'

She stopped and twisted her hands nervously together. It was a habit of hers when anything troubled her for which she could find no reason.

'Well, my dear, will you not finish your sentence?'

'I hardly know how to explain my meaning. I am bitterly disappointed to think that Mr. Fleming could have contracted a low marriage —he seems too refined, too cultured altogether. But perhaps he was young, and the girl was pretty; anyhow, I think we ought to be sorry

for him, for he must have had much to bear. Perhaps, after all, it is a good thing that his wife is dead.'

'I thought you would have judged him more severely.'

'I don't seem as though I could find it in my heart to be hard on him; he is too unhappy, Aunt Catherine. I am sure that he has repented and is sorry; perhaps that is what he meant about not being worthy of our friendship. He may hold himself aloof for that very reason, and I am to judge him harshly!'

'No, Olga, I did not say that; only the world will turn a cold shoulder on him. A gentleman has no right to marry beneath him. How can he expect his friends to be the same to him afterwards?'

'There may be justifying circumstances,' she returned firmly, 'or he might have been very young, Aunt Catherine. Jem may say what he likes; but he does not know Mr. Fleming. He has never seen him with Reggie; if he had, I don't think he would be quite so hard on him.'

'All the same, he has made me very uncomfortable.'

'That is so wrong of him; and, after all, we have found out nothing.'

'No, but we shall never feel quite easy until

we know if Jem be right or not. Well, it is no use talking about it any more. Time will show, I suppose, whether Mr. Fleming is a desirable acquaintance. Jem will never rest until he has sifted matters—he will find out all about him, and then write to us again—and I suppose we must wait for that.'

'And until then you will keep him at a distance?'

'On the contrary, he keeps himself at a distance, but I shall certainly do my best to avoid him. I cannot help it, Olga,' as she looked at me reproachfully; for this was not her idea of fairness. 'Jem is right: we are two unprotected females, and must take care of ourselves; and, after all, Mr. Fleming may be a wolf in sheep's clothing.'

And then I carried away my letters, for what was the use of prolonging the argument? Olga never could be induced to speak severely of any sinner, however black he might be. To her sweet nature it was a sort of necessity to think the best of everyone. She would even have been sorry for the poor wolf: he must have been so hungry before he had eaten the sheep, as she would have said. Olga went alone to the shore that morning, and after luncheon we drove to St. Genette. Olga seemed a little tired on her return, and for a wonder betook

herself to a couch in the salon; but I heard her question Jeanne if Reggie had been to the little gate as usual.

Jeanne had replied, to her surprise, in the negative. Nothing had been seen of le petit. 'That is strange,' had been Olga's response; 'Reggie has never failed me before;' and then she had taken up her book and said nothing more.

As I was not tired, I went out into the garden and strolled about a little. I could not help feeling somewhat home-sick. I wished I were in the old English garden with Jasper spreading his tail on the mossy old sundial. The peaches and nectarines must be ripening on the sunny walls, and the flower-borders would be a glowing mass of colours. I wondered if Virginia were pacing the Lady's Walk as usual, with her pale, sad face turned to the sunset. I was so busy with these reflections that a slight sound near me quite startled me. To my surprise, and I may add annoyance, it was Mr. Fleming unlatching the little gate. I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw him deliberately unfasten it and come quickly towards me.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Sefton, for this intrusion,' he began hastily; 'but I am in great anxiety about Reggie: he looks very ill, and I

am going for the English doctor, if you will kindly tell me where he lives ?'

'Reggie ill ?' In a moment my brief annoyance vanished.

'Yes, and I do not know what is the matter with him. He has been very sick, and seems in a high fever. Will you tell me to whom I had better go ? There is no time to be lost, as he is all alone.' He looked at me wistfully and hesitated. But there was no need for him to say any more.

'That child alone ! I will go to him at once ; of course, I will stay with him while you are away.'

'Oh, how good you are !' he said earnestly, and I am sure there were tears in his eyes ; he seemed terribly agitated. 'I wanted to ask you, but I hardly dared to make such a request. I have locked him in, because he seems wandering a little ; but I could not bear leaving him alone, poor little chap ! But if you will stop with him——'

He did not wait to finish his sentence, but dashed up the steps and unlocked the door. I could hear Reggie's voice talking rather excitedly as I entered. But before looking at him, I gave Mr. Fleming the necessary directions. 'If Dr. Addison should be out, there is his partner, Mr. Dodd, in the Rue d'Accord ; they are both clever men,' I finished.

He nodded as though he understood me, and ran down the steps—and I was left alone with the boy. What a strange bare room! just as Olga described it; even the gray kitten was sitting on one of the steps leading to the loft. The windows were all closed, probably for safety, but I opened one of them; the close stove was alight, and a curiously shaped vessel like a big coffee-pot with a black handle was on the top; I found it was full of hot water.

Reggie was tossing uncomfortably on his pillows; his dear little face was flushed, and his lips hot and dry; his beautiful eyes were wide open, and had the lustrous look of fever. He was chattering about 'a great big butterpie.' 'Isn't it a funny butterpie?' he asked when he saw me.

I knew very little about children's illnesses, but I guessed it was a sudden feverish attack; perhaps he had been running about too much in thes un, and had overheated himself, or he had taken something to disagree with him. I knew Wilfred had these sort of attacks, and often alarmed his parents; some children were always light-headed when they were unwell. I would not let myself be frightened, though he certainly looked very ill! The poor little creature seemed wretchedly uncomfortable; the bedclothes were all in a heap. I was glad

now of the hot water; I could sponge his face and hands, and give him a little warm milk and water to drink; then I removed the pillow and some of the outer coverings, and he seemed less restless.

It would be some time before the doctor could be here, and it was growing dusk. I had some difficulty in lighting a small lamp that stood on the writing-table; it had not been properly trimmed, and the flame was rather smoky. I placed it as far as possible from the bed, for it would never do to be left in darkness; but the smell of the paraffin oil was sickening, and the room looked bare and comfortless in that murky light. What a place for a delicate child! the floor had evidently not been swept for a week. I heard afterwards that Madame Perrot neglected her lodgers; and there were marks of dust on everything.

Reggie seemed quieter now, and lay babbling rather indistinctly of father and kitty. He seemed to like me beside him; once he thought I was Olga. 'Tell me about the howl, my dear,' he whispered with confidential huskiness—'the howl what lived in the ivy-bush.' That hour seemed a very long one to me. Every now and then I went to the door to listen. How dark and quiet it looked outside—almost oppressively still! Our little grove seemed to shut out the outer

world. Only once a sudden gleam shone through the foliage; it was a light from Olga's room—she must be wondering at my long absence. The next minute it disappeared and all was dark again, and I went back to Reggie.

I was thankful when at last footsteps reached my ears, and the door in the wall was unlocked.

'It is Mr. Dodd. Dr. Addison is at St. Genette. Have I been very long?'

As Mr. Fleming put the question, he stooped down and looked at his boy, and I shook hands with the young doctor. I saw him cast a surprised look round the room; then his eyes rested on Mr. Fleming a moment. He was certainly a strange contrast to his surroundings; there was an indefinable air of refinement and culture about him, that would have struck even a stranger; even the way he walked across the room to fetch the smoky lamp was somehow different to the way other men walked; there was a free grace in every movement, an ease of bearing, a restrained strength, that was quite unique.

He held the lamp quietly while Mr. Dodd examined his little patient; nor did he speak except to answer his questions. I could not help admiring his power of repressing himself.

'Well, what do you think of him?' he asked, when the doctor had finished.

'I shall be able to tell you better to-morrow,' was the evasive answer.

'Is it anything infectious?'

'Oh no, not in the least. The child has been running about too much in the sun; he has overheated or over-excited himself. How long has he been ailing?'

'He did not seem quite himself yesterday—or was it the day before?—he complained of headache, and was rather drowsy. I kept him quiet, and then he seemed better.'

'He got a little wet in that shower yesterday, did he not, Mr. Fleming? I think Miss Leigh told me so.'

'Not very; do you think that mattered?' looking at the doctor anxiously. I fancied Mr. Dodd avoided his eye.

'One cannot tell; with these delicate children it does not take much to make them ill. I should say that he has been ailing for a day or two. You must keep him very quiet, and follow my directions. His hair is too long; we must alter that.'

'Do you mean it must be cut off?' and the poor young fellow turned exceedingly pale.

'Oh, I dare say Miss Sefton will see to that,' in an off-hand way that deceived neither of us.

'Now, are you going back with me in the carriage? There will be medicine and ice required; and you had better bring some Liebig's essence back with you. Who is going to attend to my orders?'

'You may give them to me, Mr. Dodd;' and I signed to him to follow me to the other side of the room. We spoke in the lowest possible tones. I could see Mr. Fleming was straining his ears to catch what we said, but he could not hear a word.

'Is it only a simple feverish attack?'

'I can hardly tell you to-night; it is more the brain. I should say the child has the most delicate organization; he has evidently one of those sensitive, highly-wrought natures that are liable to this form of illness; there is need for great care. You will be with him to-night?'

'Yes, of course; there is no one else to nurse him. But, Mr. Dodd, do you think he could be moved close by—to La Maisonnette?'

'To-night?—no, certainly not; you must keep him where he is; it is not very comfortable, but it is cool and airy;' and then he proceeded to give me all directions, while Mr. Fleming looked at us wistfully; but he did not interfere, only, as Mr. Dodd repeated once more, 'His hair is too long and thick; if you have some scissors

by you, I should advise you to cut it rather closely,' I saw him fingering the rough locks, as though he were loath to part with them ; and as he did so, his lips were pressed tightly together, as though in intolerable pain.

As they went through the door in the wall, I stood for an instant looking out into the dark garden. As I did so, I caught a faint gleam of whiteness in the distance. If it should be Olga looking for me, for she was wearing a white gown this evening ! With a sudden longing that it should be so, I leaned over the parapet, and called her name. To my relief, she instantly responded, and I could hear her fumbling at the gate.

'Where are you, Aunt Catherine ?'

'Here at the pavilion !'

Then I could hear her running down the gravel-path, and in a minute she was beside me.

'Oh, Aunt Catherine, it is I who have been frightened this evening ! We have been looking for you everywhere, and then I thought I heard your voice. But why are you here ?'

'Hush, you must not speak so loud ; Reggie is ill, and his father is just going back with the doctor to fetch the medicine. I have promised to stay with him to-night. But, Olga, I am so thankful you have come ; there are so many

things I want that Jeanne must bring me. Mr. Fleming will be away an hour, and I must put things a little comfortable before his return. I must have another lamp, not this smoky thing.'

I was holding the door as I spoke, but now she put her hand over mine as though to open it.

'Tell me that presently. I must see Reggie first,' and as I yielded to the strong girlish pressure, she crossed the room and knelt down by the bed. 'Oh, my darling, how ill he looks!' and she lifted the little hands to her lips.

Reggie seemed to recognise her voice; for he smiled and muttered drowsily: 'She was so pretty and fluffy, my dear, and had such nice yellow eyes.'

Olga's eyes were full of tears as she listened to him; but there was no time to be lost on mere sentiment. In a moment the dear girl was as prompt and full of resources as ever. I saw her looking round the room quickly, as though to note its deficiencies.

'I must have a lamp, Olga—that one with the soft pretty shade; and my work-basket, and some of those fine towels, and a napkin or two, and a duster, and——'

'Oh, there will be more than that required,' she returned quietly; 'I must bring Jeanne to help me. You must have an easy-chair if you

are to sit up all night, and you have had no supper, and Jeanne must make you some coffee. Don't trouble yourself, Aunt Catherine; I will see to all that, and you must take care of Reggie.'

And without trusting herself to look at him again, she gave me a little reassuring nod and went away, but I followed her to whisper outside:

'You will not let Jeanne make a noise.'

'She shall not come farther than the steps. I will bring everything myself. Oh, you may trust me, dear!'

And she sent me back to my watch with the comforting thought that I had a faithful helper outside.

I am afraid to say how many journeys those two women performed between La Maisonnette and the pavilion during the next half-hour. Every few minutes I heard faint sounds at the bottom of the steps, and then Olga would enter, noiselessly carrying in one thing after another in her strong young arms, and quite regardless of her own fatigue. I do not think I ever admired her as I did that night. She was so quiet, so helpful, so full of thought for me. The easy-chair was placed by the bed, and a slip of carpet and a footstool put near it. The smoky lamp was carried away, and our pretty shaded

one placed in its stead. Then, to my surprise, another easy-chair was put near the writing-table. 'It is for Mr. Fleming; he will be so tired,' she whispered.

Only once I saw her linger over her task; it was when she saw me beginning to cut off Reggie's thick locks.

'Oh, must you do that?' she said with a little sob, and the tears were running down her cheeks as she went out. But it was not long before she came back; this time she carried a tray covered with a napkin. 'It is your supper and his,' she said softly. 'I am going to bring you some coffee, and then there is nothing else I can do. It is growing late, and Jeanne is tired and wants to shut up.'

'My dear, you have done such wonders,' and I kissed her and wished her good-night.

She had only just gone when I heard the latch of the door lifted, and Mr. Fleming entered. I saw him give a dazed sort of look at the room, as though he did not recognise it. I dare say he wondered what magician's wand had been at work during his absence. The soft shaded light, the easy-chairs, the tempting meal on the table, the steaming coffee-pot, must each have been a mystery to him; but tired and jaded as he was, he was in no mood for comfort. On the contrary, he helped me to

apply the ice to Reggie's head and give him his medicine, waiting upon me in a way that made me think again that he must have been used to illness. The ingenious manner in which he constructed a screen with a couple of chairs and the quilt so as to shield Reggie from the light proved him ready with resources. It was not until there was nothing more to be done that I saw him throw himself into a chair as though he were exhausted; and no wonder, for he had tramped miles that day.

I poured him out some coffee, and putting some sandwiches on a plate, placed the food at his elbow; but he was lying back in his chair with closed eyes and took no notice. He looked frightfully pale, and his hair was damp and matted on his temples; most likely he had eaten nothing all day. I touched him gently to rouse him. He opened his eyes; their look of misery was almost more than I could bear; but he only shook his head when I begged him to eat.

'I cannot—it is impossible!' was his answer; and then he closed his eyes again with a groan.

He wanted me to go away and leave him, but I dared not. Poor fellow!—he looked little more than a boy in that light—he was utterly spent with grief and inanition: the sight

of the little cropped head on the pillow had turned him sick.

I must do him good in spite of himself. Why need I mind him? he was only Basil's age, and I was old enough to be his mother.

'Mr. Fleming,' I said gently, 'you must drink this coffee, and, pardon me, you must eat. How are you to help me nurse Reggie if you give way like this?' and as he made no answer, I put my arm under his head, and held the cup to his lips as though he were Reggie. 'Now drink, please;' and to my relief he obeyed me.

Most likely the first taste was like a cordial to him, for he finished it almost at a draught; then I put a sandwich in his hand: 'Now eat that, and I will bring you some more coffee. Tell me truly—you have eaten nothing to-day?'

'Yes; I had some bread: that was all there was in the house. I could not leave Reggie to get anything else. May I have some more coffee? it is delicious.'

'Yes; but you must finish all those sandwiches.' But I had no need to urge him: the craving for food had returned, and he ate what I had placed before him as though he were famished; but when he had finished he pushed away the plate with a gesture of disgust.

'Isn't it horrid to think I can eat, with him

lying there! Miss Sefton, you are an angel of goodness to me to-night! Tell me, do you think my boy is in danger?'

He took my hand as he spoke; his were hot and trembling.

'How can I tell?' I faltered. 'He is very ill; and, indeed, I must go back to him. There is great need for care—Mr. Dodd said so; but he is no worse—I think he is even quieter.'

He drew a long breath, and then looked at me rather strangely.

'If he should get worse would you promise to tell me?'

'Yes; I will ask Mr. Dodd to do so.'

'You must keep your promise, for a good deal depends on it. He will not get worse, dear little chap, will he? Only—only, you know, in that case I must tell his mother.'

His mother! Was he wandering? had anxiety about Reggie been too much for him?

'Yes, I must tell Aline—I mean, I must tell my wife. She is in England;' and when he had said this he raised himself with difficulty, and went to look at Reggie.

CHAPTER III.

'HE IS EVERYTHING TO ME.'

'With patience to endure our griefs we learn not soon,
But how much later still to take them as a boon?'

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH.

'Thou who art
So happy in Thy heaven alway,
Take not mine only bliss away!'

MRS. BROWNING.

I WENT back to my little patient. Reggie was moaning, and seemed restless and ill at ease; but after a time he quieted down again into the same drowsy state. I sat beside him silently, holding the hot tiny hand in mine; there was so little one could do. Now and then a shiver passed over me as I thought of Mr. Fleming's words.

Jem was right, after all; there was need indeed to be careful. What would Olga say? How would she be able to defend Mr. Fleming now? She had pitied him, in her simplicity, thinking him a heart-broken widower; how would she

receive the astounding intelligence that his wife was really alive and in England—that Reggie had a mother? Would she not be shocked by his reticence, his seeming indifference? Would she not ask, as I was questioning myself now, what it could all mean?

And yet there might be some explanation possible, some satisfactory solution of the mystery. He might have come over to St. Croix on Reggie's account. Perhaps he was too poor to bring his wife too; she might be delicate—an invalid. Only the strongest necessity would induce him to alarm her by the account of Reggie's illness; it was his care, his thoughtfulness for this wife of his—this Aline—not his indifference, that had prompted his silence.

All these suggestions were plausible enough, then why did I not believe them? Why did I instinctively refuse to acknowledge them, while a growing distrust and uneasiness seized me?

'Mr. Fleming is a perfect stranger to us,' so the inward argument went on; 'he is a proud, reserved man. Is such an one likely to speak of his family affairs? How was he to read our thoughts, or to know that we had imagined him a widower? Such an idea may have never entered his head. This is not the reason why

he has kept himself so aloof, and made no response to our friendly overtures;' and so on.

I could not refute these arguments; but a woman judges by instinct, and in my inmost heart I felt that Jem's story was true. Mr. Fleming was evidently a dissatisfied, unhappy man. That this unhappiness was connected in some way with his married life I was now as convinced as though the evidence were before my eyes. He had married beneath him, and he was now ashamed of the woman he had made his wife. Perhaps they were separated! And Olga had been thrown into the company of this man! No wonder her young guardian, Jem, was up in arms. What would Mr. Leigh say? My responsibility weighed heavy on me that night. How was I to behave in future to this poor wolf in sheep's clothing? How was I to keep him and Olga apart, and yet do my duty to this worse than motherless child—this little innocent being who was perhaps made the scapegoat of his parents' transgressions? And as I asked myself these perplexing questions I involuntarily raised my eyes. Mr. Fleming was watching me, as though he read my thoughts; his face had grown paler and more haggard. His fixed, miserable glance gave me a shock.

'Do not be hard upon me; you do not know

it all.' That was what his eyes seemed to say to me. Poor boy! he was so young—only Basil's age, if Basil was living. How was one to judge him severely? That tired, sad young face seemed to appeal strangely to me.

The next minute I rose softly, and taking up the strip of soft carpet Olga had put for my use, I spread it beside him with a hassock and Reggie's rejected pillow. He looked at me with a bewildered air, as though he did not understand what I was doing. I put my hand on his shoulder:

'You are worn out,' I said gently; 'this is the only couch I can contrive for you. You must lie down and try to sleep. I will promise to wake you if there be anything for you to do; and'—as he hesitated—'you will be able to help me more to-morrow if you sleep now.'

'Do you really mean it?' he asked under his breath.

'Yes; please do not keep me waiting. I want to cover you with this'—pointing to a wrap in my hand. 'This place is very draughty.'

And then his weariness was so great he resisted no longer. As I stooped to adjust the covering he arrested my hand and carried it to his lips.

'Oh, how good you are! I never knew anyone so good! I do not deserve it.'

But almost before I left him his eyes closed and he was asleep. Once or twice during the night I looked at him as I passed to and fro on some errand; he was sleeping soundly, his head pillowed on one arm, the other stretched on the rug that covered him. There was something boyish in his attitude; his face looked calm and happy, as though some peaceful dream had beguiled him. There were no lines now in the broad, open forehead; the smooth, dark face was at rest. The firm lips had relaxed into a half-smile. Only once, when the dawn felt chilly and I put a shawl over him, he stirred and frowned.

'Don't, Aline; it hurts—it hurts dreadfully!' I heard him mutter, as he flung away from me.

During the hours that followed I had plenty of time for reflection. I could make my plans for the morrow undisturbed. After all, there was a way out of my perplexity. Olga must be made to understand that any intercourse with Mr. Fleming must be forbidden for the future. Only on this understanding could I retain my present post. She was so unselfish she would not refuse, for Reggie's sake. If Olga were only off my mind, I felt I could devote myself gladly to the service of these two helpless beings—for a man is generally

helpless in some degree in a sick-room, unless he is especially fitted by nature for a nurse.

Mr. Fleming was not without resources. He was helpful and self-reliant, but his anxiety for his child unmanned him. I knew that for his boy's good he would allow himself to be guided and advised; his very gratitude would make him pliable in my hands. No, I must not disquiet myself any more; with a little tact and discrimination I should be able to steer through my difficulties.

I was so sure, too, that Olga's good sense would aid me—the dear child had never yet disappointed me.

The longest night must have an end, and by-and-by I saw the gray dawn creeping through the uncurtained window; there were faint streaks of light across the sky; the birds began to twitter. The coming day was heralded by numerous voices—by the crowing of cocks from the poultry-yards; by the faint bleating of sheep. The sun was rising, and soon the happy, waking earth would be bathed in his golden radiance. It was still so early, that I was surprised to hear footsteps approaching. They were not Jeanne's sabots clattering up the steps; that light tread could only belong to Olga.

The next instant there was a gentle knock,

the door was softly opened, and my dear girl entered, looking a little pale and anxious, as though she had not rested as well as usual, and laden with a heavy tray that she had carried all the way from La Maisonnette.

'I thought you would like your breakfast early,' she whispered in my ear; 'so, as I was awake, I would not trouble Jeanne. How is he, Aunt Catherine?'

'I do not quite know, my dear. He does not seem worse; but it is for the doctor to tell us.'

'Oh, he is not worse, I can see it; I am sure of it,' she returned, kneeling down by the bed and kissing him softly. 'Oh, my darling! how sweet he looks! but I am so sorry his pretty hair has been touched.'

'Hush, Olga!' for she had not perceived Mr. Fleming, and he was now awake and watching us. 'My dear, will you go away now and come to me presently?' and she understood me in a moment and rose at once—a hint was always enough for Olga. She did not look beyond the bed, but only said quietly:

'Yes, I will see you by-and-by. Please take your breakfast, Aunt Catherine;' and then she went away softly.

I looked at the meal her loving hands had prepared. There was a little brown teapot for

me; a tiny coffee-pot, that was evidently intended for Mr. Fleming; a pile of crisp, delicious-looking toast; some new-laid eggs; a pat of fresh, golden butter. All served so daintily! I could see Mr. Fleming was looking at it too.'

'This is your breakfast as well as mine,' I said with a smile.

'May I have it presently?' he returned quite humbly, as though he were asking a favour. 'I must go down to the bay and have a dip first. I could not sit down like this,' with a shrug, as though he were conscious of his jaded appearance.

'The stove is still warm; it will heat your coffee. Yes, go; it will do you good;' but he lingered to look at Reggie and question me.

'She did not think that he looked any worse.'

'Who? oh, you mean Miss Leigh. No, I do not think he is worse this morning. Indeed, he seems rather easier.'

'If he should get well, it will be you who will have saved him,' he replied in a voice of intense emotion; 'what shall I not owe you—if—if——' he stopped as though unable to say another word.

'Please do not say any more; we cannot tell. It is in God's hands, not mine. Look what a lovely morning it is!'

'I am keeping you from your breakfast, and

you look so tired,' he returned remorsefully; 'I will go,' and he hurried away.

Five minutes later Olga's soft footsteps returned again.

'He has gone to bathe,' she said eagerly; 'I saw him pass with his towels. So we are safe for some time. Let me pour out your tea, Aunt Catherine, and then I must put things a little comfortable for you both.'

She was running away, but I held her fast.

'Olga, my dear, I want to speak to you. I had rather a shock last night. Mr. Fleming—oh, I don't want to speak against him, poor fellow! but he is not what we thought him—not a widower. His wife is living; she is in England.'

I fancied she turned a shade paler in her surprise; but she answered me very quietly:

'I am glad that he told you. It is better to know the truth about people!'

'Yes, and Jem must have been right in what he wrote.'

'Very probably,' but there was no indignation in her clear tones; 'it was stupid of me to get that idea into my head; but I certainly thought his wife was dead. Did he say anything about her, Aunt Catherine?'

'Not a word—only that he must tell her if Reggie got worse. Olga, I fear there must be

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something very wrong. It makes me uneasy that you should be with him.'

'It is not our affair,' she returned quickly; 'his wife has nothing to do with us. It is only Reggie who concerns us. You will not forsake him, surely?'

'Not if—if—you will promise——'

'There is nothing for me to promise,' she replied with a touch of impatience in her voice; 'it is not I who am nursing Reggie; it is only you, Aunt Catherine.'

'Yes; but, my dear, do you not see my difficulty? Last night Mr. Fleming slept upon the floor, and when to-night comes, what am I do with him? and there is no other room than this, and you and Jeanne are alone at La Maisonnette!'

'But I shall not be there to-night,' she returned, as though a bright idea struck her. 'Listen to me, dear—to-night you shall lie down, and I will watch Reggie. There is the big couch in the drawing-room that can be brought over to the pavilion, and you shall rest, and I will call you from time to time.'

'And Mr. Fleming?'

'Oh, there is the room at the end of the passage,' she answered in an off-hand manner. 'Jeanne shall get it ready for him, and he shall have his supper and breakfast in the salle-à-

manger; and Jeanne will wait on him: is it not an excellent idea? but we must not talk any more—your tea is getting cold, and I want to do a little dusting before he returns. Do you see this red sash, Aunt Catherine? when he goes out and you want me, you must fasten this to the railing at the top of the steps, and when I come to the little gate I shall see it; it is to be our signal to each other. There, I have arranged it all, and there is nothing to say more!' and she moved away quietly and began to put things in order, arranging the books in neat piles, and removing the lamp; but she had not been long at work before the door in the wall was unlatched, and Mr. Fleming re-entered, looking all the fresher for his bath. Olga left off at once and shook hands with him. 'I am sure Reggie looks a little better,' she said in a low voice. 'Aunt Catherine has finished her breakfast; you must have yours now;' and she went out, carrying the lamp with her. I saw a strange, undefinable expression flit across Mr. Fleming's face as he closed the door after her; perhaps those few words cheered him, for he seemed to enjoy his breakfast, although directly he had finished he seemed so restless that I recommended him to stroll up and down the garden until Mr. Dodd arrived.

'Do I fidget you?' he asked penitently. 'I

am afraid you want to get rid of me. If I could only control this restlessness!'

'You will walk it off,' was my reply; and to my relief he took my advice. I suppose Olga saw him marching up and down the little path, for she never came near us.

Mr. Dodd's report was hardly as satisfactory as I had expected; his manner was guarded and he spoke vaguely.

'Oh no, our little patient is no worse,' he said in answer to the father's anxious questioning; 'indeed, I trust he is going on fairly well; but there is little change, and we cannot be too careful. A great deal depends on the nursing;' and here he looked at me.

I saw at once that he would not speak out plainly before Mr. Fleming; so I begged the latter to leave us for a few minntes, and he obeyed me rather reluctantly.

'Now, Mr. Dodd,' I began as he closed the door, 'you may speak to me as openly as you wish.'

'I do not want to alarm you,' he replied cautiously; 'but the child is very ill, and one can never tell in these cases.'

'You do not find any improvement, then?'

'No material improvement—certainly not.'

'And we must not move him?'

'On no account; he will do very well where

he is—this room is cool and airy ; and as far as quietness goes it might be a hermitage ; but I suppose,' looking at me inquiringly, 'there is very little accommodation ? still, La Maisonnette is so close.'

'Oh, we can manage!' for it was no use taking a stranger into confidence. And, after all, Olga's plan could be tried ; so, after giving me a few more directions and promising to call in the evening, Mr. Dodd took his leave. He was young ; but his manner gave me confidence, and I had heard from the Milners that he was considered extremely clever.

After our early luncheon was over, I wrote out rather a long list of things that I required from the town. There was money to be changed at the bank, and various commissions to be executed. Mr. Fleming undertook them cheerfully. I could see that he was sanguine about Reggie ; he thought Mr. Dodd had not spoken quite so gravely, and, of course, I did not undeceive him. The long walk would be good for him, and he would have the pleasure of feeling himself of use, besides which, his absence for an hour or two would enable us to make arrangements for the night. There was much to be done ; the pavilion was pleasant enough by day, but it was decidedly cold and cheerless by night. Directly Mr. Fleming had started

for St. Croix, I hung out the red signal, and after a little delay Olga come. I set her and Jeanne to work, and in about an hour we had made things more comfortable. The big couch with pillows and quilt was placed ready for the night, and a Japanese screen round it. Some more strips of carpet were laid over the boards, the newly-trimmed lamp brought back, and Olga had actually washed the floor over, and had placed a great bowl of roses on the writing-table before Mr. Fleming returned.

He came in hot and dusty, and paused a moment on the threshold. Olga had her back turned to the door, and did not see him; she was arranging the little tea-table. She wore a coarse bib-apron over her pretty summer gown, and had pinned a handkerchief over her brown hair to protect her from the dust. Mr. Fleming did not seem to recognise her. I saw him put up his arm to shield his eyes, as though the sunshine dazzled him. She started and coloured a little when she turned round and saw him, but did not speak. When she had left the room, Mr. Fleming came close to me.

'Miss Sefton,' he said hurriedly, as though he were agitated, 'please do not let Miss Leigh work in the way she is doing; it pains me excessively to see it; it is not right. I have strong arms. I am not useless. There is nothing I

will not do if you will only tell me how I may be of service. It is not for Miss Leigh, it is for me, to work.'

I looked up into the young determined face. In my heart I admired the proud independence that refused a girl's services. Unwittingly he had played into my hands.

'Will you really promise to do as I wish?'

'Try me!' was the eager answer; and a wonderful softness came into his gray eyes.

Oh, if he had only been Basil, I felt then that I could have loved him!

'You are very good,' I returned quietly; and then I explained to him the arrangements we had made for the night.

To my dismay, he turned very pale, and looked exceedingly unhappy.

'Oh, you will not do that?' he said piteously; 'you will never ask me to leave him? I would do anything else. I will sit up all night, or there is the loft. I would lie down on a heap of shavings—anything—anything—so that I may be near him!'

'But, Mr. Fleming——'

'Oh, you don't know what he is to me!' he interrupted. 'If he should die, I should just go and hang or drown myself. I could not live without my boy, baby as he is, he is everything to me.'

The tears came into my eyes to hear him talk like that, poor fellow! and for his own sake I must be firm. I took his hand—it was clenched, and felt like iron—and I spoke to him as though I were his mother.

'My dear,' I said, 'you must not talk so; you have been very good and patient. No one could have behaved better; but you must trust me—a little. I am very tired, for I did not close my eyes last night, and if Olga will sit beside Reggie I shall be able to sleep.'

'It will be all the same,' he urged eagerly; 'you can rest there behind that screen, and I will promise not to take my eyes off him. Do you think I cannot keep awake as well as Miss Leigh? And it is my own boy who is lying there!'

I shook my head. He was making it very difficult for me, and yet I would not give it up. I knew that there would be no rest for me under such circumstances. He would not know how to manage Reggie, and I should spend the night in watching them both.

He looked at me in his keen way.

'This does not please you; you want me to go away!'

'Yes, for this one night. It will be better. I would not propose it if I did not know it would be for the best. Mr. Fleming, you must

not think me cruel. If Reggie be worse—if there be any change, I mean—I will promise that you shall be called at once. If you leave your window open, there will be no difficulty. Either Olga or I will come. Can you not trust me this once?'

He did not answer for a moment, and then he said in a hasty tone:

'Yes, I can trust you; but it is long since I have said that to any woman; but, remember, it will be with my all. Very well, I will go; send me away when you wish;' and then he went back to Reggie; but it wrung my heart to see him sitting there with his head buried in his hands. Ah me, that the love for a little child should be so great, and yet there are many of us who doubt the Fatherhood of God!

It was late, nearly ten o'clock, before I asked him to withdraw. He had not once moved or spoken; but at my first whisper he rose at once, and, with one long look at his boy, went out on the steps, where Jeanne and her lantern were waiting for him. I could not let him go like that, and followed him out.

'Mr. Fleming, you will try to sleep? I may need you to-morrow.'

'Oh yes, I shall try,' he replied in a weary tone.

'You do not know how grateful I am to you for this compliance with my wishes.'

'I would rather you had told me to lie down on these stones; may I—' with a sudden change of tone—'may I stop outside here?'

'And lay up rheumatism for life! No, certainly not, and there is a comfortable bed ready for you. Come, Jeanne, I entrust monsieur to your care; make him comfortable. Good-night, Mr. Fleming; God will watch over Reggie as well as though you were beside him. You must trust your boy to Him;' but I must confess that I felt a sad choking sensation in my throat as I watched him walking with bent head, as though he hardly knew where he was going. Once I saw Jeanne catch hold of his arm as though he were stumbling.

Olga was sitting beside Reggie, and looked wakeful and vigilant. There was no need for any words between us, and I threw myself heavily on the couch, and was soon asleep. Two or three times that night Olga roused me, but I always resumed my interrupted nap.

I woke at last of my own accord, and peeped round the screen. The gray dawn was just breaking, but the lamp was still alight. To my surprise, Olga had quitted her post. I thought I heard her voice speaking to someone outside; the next minute she re-entered.

'Were you speaking to Mr. Fleming, Olga?'

'Yes; this is the second time he has come.'

'He has not slept, then?'

'Yes, during the earlier part of the night; but towards morning he got restless. I have sent him away happier this time, Aunt Catherine. I do believe Reggie is a little better—that Mr. Dodd will say so.'

I thought so, too, as I looked at him, and in our joy and relief we kissed each other, and Olga cried a little.

'Oh, he is such a darling!' she said; 'I think it would break my heart if we were to lose him. I do not believe I have ever liked any other child in quite the same way;' and I understood her. The little creature had certainly found his way to our hearts in the most singular manner.

'And now, Aunt Catherine,' she continued in a different voice, 'what are we to do about breakfast?'

'Are you very tired, Olga?'

'Not so very tired,' was the brisk reply; 'but I shall have a nap presently.'

'Then in that case I will leave you in charge for an hour, while I change my things and refresh myself. Shall you be afraid to be left, Olga?'

'Not a bit! you must stay and have breakfast with Mr. Fleming. Yes, that will be best, Aunt Catherine.'

I knew I could trust her, and there was nothing to be done for Reggie; so I went back to La Maisonnette. Jeanne was in the salle-à-manger, and I begged her to prepare an early breakfast. Just as I was sitting down to the table, Mr. Fleming came in, evidently from another dip in the bay, for he had his towels over his arm; he looked very pleased to see me.

'Reggie is better!' he said eagerly. 'Miss Leigh is sure of it.'

'Yes, I think so, I hope so! We shall see what Mr. Dodd says;' and then I added reproachfully: 'After all, you have not slept.'

'Oh yes, I have!' he returned in a boyish sort of way; 'and the bed was so comfortable! I slept quite two hours, and then I got up and dressed, and went over to the pavilion; Miss Leigh heard me, and came out.'

'Yes, I know.'

'I went back again and had another nap; but somehow I could not get the dear little chap out of my thoughts, and I was obliged to run across again. I am afraid Miss Leigh must have thought me a bore.'

'I am afraid so too.'

He gave an odd little laugh at that, and then said rather unsteadily.

'Don't chaff me, please; of course I behaved

like an ass last night; but if you knew what it cost me to obey you!'

'I do know.'

'And yet you asked me to go! Never mind, I am too happy to reproach you. Well, it was the hardest bit of work I ever did in my life; but all the same, I did it.' And then a curious change came over his face, and he walked away to the window. 'If Reggie be really better,' he said as he stood there, 'there will be no need to tell Aline; we shall not be here much longer.'

'Do you not think that in any case his mother ought to know?' I asked cautiously.

'No, I think not,' was the hesitating answer; 'there are mothers *and* mothers. Aline is not one of the anxious sort.' And with this vague response he whistled to Rollo, and went out into the garden until I had finished my breakfast.

CHAPTER IV.

LOOKING AT THE SUNSET.

'Oh, the moorland by the sea! The red sun in gallan splendour
Drops his morning kiss upon it, ere he goeth on his way,
Or athwart its gold and purple steals a benediction tender,
Ere night's starry curtains shroud him at the dewy close of day.'

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

I WAS much comforted to find that Mr. Dodd endorsed our favourable opinion of Reggie. The child was going on well, he said—much better than he had ventured to hope; there had been a change for the better in the night, and though there was still the same care required, he trusted there would be no relapse. I told him how we had managed for the night, and the hard work I had had with Mr. Fleming. I thought he seemed much interested.

'You were perfectly right,' he said; 'you have saved yourself wisely for to-night; you

could not possibly have done otherwise. Mr. Fleming will be reasonable enough to own this.'

'He could not have kept awake,' I replied; 'he was so worn-out with anxiety, and I should have been watching them both all night.'

'Yes, I understand; get him over to La Maisonnette again to-night, if you like. I cannot dispense with my head-nurse yet.' Mr. Dodd and I understood each other perfectly. I overheard him afterwards talking to Mr. Fleming on the steps.

'Leave it all to the ladies,' he was saying. 'Miss Sefton is an excellent nurse; you are perfectly safe in her hands. The boy is doing very well; and with such scanty accommodation——'

'Oh, I do not mind about to-night!' replied Mr. Fleming in his eager way, without letting the doctor finish. 'They may send me where they like, but last night it was different. Doctor,' dropping his voice, 'I give you my word I would rather have cut my throat than have had to go off and leave that little chap; and yet, when she told me to go, I was obliged to obey her. She is a woman one must obey somehow; I never knew anyone like her.'

'Oh yes, I know what you mean; and she is a capital nurse, too. Very well, I shall look in

again this evening. Can I take you down to the town, Mr. Fleming? It will be a little distraction, and you will be out of the lady's way.'

I think this latter argument prevailed; for Mr. Fleming let himself be carried off as quietly as a lamb. Olga went back to La Maisonnette for a couple of hours, and I was left alone with my little charge.

Oh, the stillness of that noontide watch! I had to shake off drowsiness once or twice by walking to the open window. Outside the sunshine was blazing; white butterflies, Reggie's favourite playfellows, were fluttering hither and thither; the low apple-trees were bending under their load; some bees were returning laden with honey from the fields of clover; an old man in a blue blouse was working among the cabbage; our little grove looked cool and shady. How long had I been at the pavilion? Only two days—the time seemed endless! Two days ago Mr. Fleming had been a stranger, and now I did not try to disguise from myself the strong interest I felt in him. He had come into my life with this strange suddenness, and I felt that I could never banish him again.

'Olga will not always be with me,' I thought, as I looked out dreamily at the gray head bobbing among the cabbages. 'It is only for

her sake that I am careful. Why should I not continue his friend, even if we find Basil? there will be room for him. I must find out why he is so lonely and unhappy, and then, surely, there will be some way of helping him. Even Virginia will be interested; she is so sorry for people who are unhappy; and we are rich;' and a sort of gladness came over me as I remembered our beautiful home—a sudden sense of power and well-being—almost for the first time. And he had the same name; and it was the sort of work Robert would have loved, to make this poor young man believe in human nature again.

Mr. Fleming returned just as Jeanne came over from La Maisonnette with our luncheon. She told me Olga was still asleep, so I charged her on no account to disturb her. The rest of the day passed very quietly. Mr. Fleming spent the afternoon watching his boy; but he was careful not to disturb me. If I wanted him, he was always at my side in a moment; and he seemed very grateful if I let him do anything for Reggie.

'I am not in the way, am I?' he asked once. 'I wish there were something I could do for you, but I am such a clumsy fellow. Still, if you will only let me stop, I do so love to watch him. Look here, Miss Sefton, I think he wants to

keep me;' and he showed me how Reggie's feeble fingers were clinging round his hand.

'Of course you may stay,' I returned, smiling at them both; it was such a pretty picture, only, somehow, I could only see it dimly through a mist. 'Do you think that I can have the heart to send you away again so soon?'

He looked a little grave at the remembrance of the previous night, but he only said:

'I am afraid I was very selfish. You were quite right—Mr. Dodd said so; and if I had fallen asleep I should never have forgiven myself.'

'Well, I am going to reward your obedience,' I returned lightly; and, as he laid the little hand down and followed me to the window, I continued: 'You may stay here to-night if you like. At least, I can promise you a better couch than the floor.'

His face lighted up in a moment; a quick flush of pleasure crossed it.

'Do you really mean it? Will you indeed permit me to stay? Shall I not be a hindrance to you?'

'No; I have been thinking it over. I have promised Mr. Dodd that I will take the nursing myself to-night, and as, thanks to you, I had some hours' sleep, I shall be able to manage it.'

'And, of course, Miss Leigh is tired?'

'She would not own it; but her watch was a long one, and she is not used to nursing. So, if you do not mind——'

'I—mind!'—and a flash of the gray eyes answered me. 'I, who owe everything to your goodness, your generosity—my boy's life—my——'

'Hush, please!'—laying my hand on his arm. I almost forgot he was not belonging to me; we so soon grow to love those who are dependent on us for kindness, and he was only a boy to me—a boy like Basil. 'Well, that is arranged, and——'

'Wait one moment, please. There is Miss Leigh; we must not forget her. She would like to say good-night to Reggie—she is so fond of him, and he of her. Do you think I do not see all that?'

'Well?'

'May I look if she be still in the garden?—she was there just now—and then I will bring her across.'

There was a repressed eagerness in his manner; but I hardly knew how to refuse. It was such a little thing to ask, and it would please Olga. So, after a moment's hesitation—which I hoped he did not notice—I let him go. Five minutes after I saw them walking

down the path, and went out on the steps to meet them.

'Aunt Catherine,' Olga said brightly, and I could see she was quite pleased and excited, 'Mr. Fleming says there is such a beautiful sunset, and you must go with him and see it while I sit by Reggie. It will not take you long, and the air will do you good, and you have a long night before you.'

So this was what they had plotted—for I could see how busily they were talking—as they came up the garden; after all, it was only about me.

'We have settled all that, Miss Sefton,' observed Mr. Fleming, with his old coolness; 'if you will just fling that lace thing over your head, we will go at once.'

'And I will stop with Reggie. Do please go, Aunt Catherine;' and Olga put her arms round me and gave me a gentle little push towards the steps, and Mr. Fleming held out his hand. 'It will only take you a few minutes, and the boy is so much better.'

'Yes, I think he is, Olga. Mr. Dodd seemed quite surprised at the progress he has made since the morning.' And then I let myself be persuaded; my head felt heavy and tired, and the evening air was so delicious.

I was surprised to see Mr. Fleming unlock the door in the wall.

'We shall see it much better from the common, and the air is fresher there,' he explained; 'and it is just as quiet as the garden.' And then, as we walked down the field, he said hurriedly: 'I think Miss Leigh will like to be alone with Reggie. She has taken such a wonderful fancy to him, has she not?'

'Yes; but, then, Olga is so fond of children—most young girls are.' And, just to tease him, I continued, half laughing: 'Yesterday you seemed reluctant to accept her services. I recollect quite a little tirade on the subject.'

'Oh, that is quite another matter,' he returned, in an embarrassed tone. 'I hope you did not think me ungracious; but if you knew how I felt when I came in and saw everything so fresh and beautiful, and Miss Leigh standing there in that apron——'

'Well, of course it was not very becoming; not that Olga would think of that.'

'That is not what I mean at all,' he returned impatiently; 'but I see you are only joking. It is not for me to notice what is becoming to a young lady, though——' he paused, and then hurried on. 'No, it was of something quite different that I was thinking. I had been bothering myself all the way home, thinking what a muddle I had made of my life, and how

everything brings its own punishment. I had just made up my mind I was not fit to be in the room with two such good women, and then I opened the door and saw Miss Leigh. I felt as though some princess had deigned to visit a beggar, and to put his hut in order. Somehow I felt quite crushed by it all, and that made me speak out as I did.'

'Yes, I see. But, Mr. Fleming, you do not understand Olga; she is one who loves to do a kindness for anyone;' for I did not want him to think that she would not have done the same for the oldest and plainest man in her Majesty's dominions.

'Do you think I do not know that?' and there was a touch of haughtiness in his manner; he did not like to be misunderstood. 'I have never met with anyone like Miss Leigh before; but I am glad to know that there are such people in the world. I am afraid I have not been a devout believer in human goodness, especially female human nature. It does me good to see such a noble exception.'

'Perhaps your wife—at least——' I stopped in some confusion. What was I going to say?

He turned round with rather a bewildered air.

'We were not speaking of my wife, but of

Miss Leigh. Do not let us talk of Aline just now. Look at that sunset! is not that glorious — unutterably glorious? One cannot be quite hopeless when one looks at that!'

We had both stopped simultaneously. Sefton Point was just below us, and all around us the flashing waters of the bay. The western heavens were blazing with marvellous light, one colour merging into another: now crimson, now rose edged with pearl, now a sheet of vivid gold, with a molten, glittering sea under it. It seemed to me as I stood there as though a door were opened in heaven—as though that flood of glory must herald the white-robed messengers of mercy, the guardian angels of the night, if only our eyes were not too gross to see them. How dim this world must look to them as they glide through those mysterious portals—this little world, where man plays his sorry part!

I looked at Mr. Fleming as these thoughts passed through my mind. He was standing with folded arms, intently watching the spectacle.

'How beautiful, how unearthly it all looks!' he murmured. 'I have never seen anything quite so fine before. Miss Sefton, in the face of all that,' pointing to the sea and sky, 'I could not talk of my wife. Some day, when Reggie is

better—quite well, I mean—I will tell you my miserable story, and you will say to me, "Good-bye, Mr. Fleming; for I do not wish for your acquaintance any more."'

'I am sure I shall say no such thing.'

'Will you not? but you have not heard my story yet. Oh, I grant you there are extenuating circumstances!—young hot blood, the wilfulness of boyhood; but there are some things that harden a man, that drag him down; and, after all, I have been much to blame.'

'Perhaps so.'

He turned round and looked at me with a smile.

'Do you think that forgiveness is possible? but you do not know—ingratitude is not a light sin.'

'No sin is light, Mr. Fleming; but I am one who believes in repentance. A man may go wrong; but it is never too late to retrace his steps. While there is life there is hope; we may say that of every human creature.'

'How curious!' he observed, in a musing tone; 'but you remind me so much of a friend of mine. Sometimes when you are speaking, I seem to hear his voice; he thought, like you, that there are infinite possibilities in every human being; he was always talking about such things;' he stopped, and, by his frown, I could

see he was trying to throw off some painful recollection.

'Mr. Fleming, I am afraid we must go back.'

'Oh, I had forgotten Reggie for the moment! Fancy my forgetting that boy even for an instant! Do you know, I could not sleep without him last night—not properly, I mean—I have got so used to feeling him near me; I like to know I have got him all safe. Isn't it strange to care for a child like that? I could not have believed it once.'

'I suppose he is your only child, Mr. Fleming?'

I thought he seemed a little surprised at the question.

'Yes, there was a girl; but she only lived three months; she died in convulsions.' He turned his face away. 'I was sorry at the time; but I think I am glad now, and I only want Reggie.'

We had reached the pavilion by this time, and found Olga sitting beside the boy. She rose directly she saw us, and wished us both good-night.

It was growing dusk, and after a short interval Mr. Fleming lighted the lamp and sat down to read; but his attention often strayed from his book. Reggie was a little restless at

first, but after an hour or two he seemed more comfortable, and then Mr. Fleming said he would have a nap, and I saw nothing more of him until morning. He was young enough to sleep soundly, and there was no reason to disturb him. He told me afterwards that he had never rested more comfortably. 'I felt even in my dreams that I was near him, and I knew you would wake me if he got restless again. Now you must let me take your place, for you look downright ill this morning.' I told him that I would go across to La Maisonnette presently, when Mr. Dodd had paid his early visit, and I kept my word. Olga was evidently expecting me.

'Oh, you poor thing, how tired you look!' was her first greeting.

'Never mind that, Olga dear. Mr. Dodd says that Reggie is quite out of danger now, so I am going to leave him to his father this morning, and have a nice rest. Tell Jeanne to attend to Mr. Fleming's luncheon. He is to put up the red signal if I am wanted. They will do very well for a few hours: Mr. Dodd says so—and I confess I am rather worn out.'

And then Olga pounced on me and carried me off to my room. How cool and comfortable it looked! My last impression as I fell asleep was the remembrance of Olga in her white

gown closing the brown shutters, while a bee hummed lazily about her.

The next few days passed quietly. At first, Olga and I shared the night-nursing between us; but one morning I again proposed to Mr. Dodd that Reggie should be moved to La Maisonnette, and to my relief he made no objection.

'It would be so much easier,' I said; 'I could have him in my own room, and then there would be no need for any more sitting up. It is not necessary now, but I do not like leaving him.'

'I think the other way would be preferable, and you have had enough inconvenience. Miss Leigh was talking to me yesterday; she is afraid you will be knocked up. Suppose you talk to Mr. Fleming about it. You could easily have the boy well wrapped up and carried across. I dare say his father would look after him all right; but after such an attack he will be weak for a long time, and a woman's care is best in such cases.'

I had made my plans, and the next morning I spoke to Mr. Fleming; he owned that it was a good idea. Reggie would be safe with me, and I should be spared all fatigue.

'Oh yes, of course it would work excellently —only——'

'Only you do not feel you can bear to part with the boy?'

'Oh, it is not that,' he returned in a tone of great embarrassment; 'I should be quite happy knowing he was over there and well looked after. It is only—well, I must say it;' and then he blurted it out with difficulty: 'Miss Sefton, you have done enough for me—too much. Last night I could not sleep for thinking about it all—how I was ever to repay you. Oh, it is not so much the money I mean—I could work for that; it is the kindness, the goodness, and all for a stranger! Am I not right in saying it is too much?'

'I do not regard you as a stranger!'

'Well, perhaps not; but all the same I have no right. Look at the nights you have sacrificed, the discomforts you have had, and you have been accustomed to such luxuries. Oh, I know; Miss Leigh has told me!'

'Miss Leigh is a sad chatterbox, I am afraid. Well, then, if these are your only objections, Reggie can be brought across at once.' He did not answer. 'Mr. Fleming, I should so like to have him, and so would Olga.'

I am sure there were tears in his eyes, for he turned away and walked to the window, but still he did not speak.

After a minute I followed him.

'It shall be just as you please. Pray do not distress yourself; but I thought by this time you would look on me as your friend. There is no question of that sort between friends—only that one loves to take trouble.'

He turned round at that.

'As though you have not taken trouble enough; as though you had not grown pale with watching over my boy. I think the angels, if there are such beings, must be like you and Miss Leigh. There, I will not hold out any longer; it is only my pride—because I hate to receive everything and give nothing. Shall I bring him now?' but I told him there was no hurry for an hour.

His little bed was all ready, and by-and-by he was carried across in his father's arms. Olga had dressed the room with flowers. The shutters were open, and one could see a vista of green leaves interlaced with slanting sunbeams; some climbing roses peeped in at the open window. As Mr. Fleming laid him down, I saw a lovely little smile flit across the white sunken face; but Reggie was too weak to express his satisfaction in any other way, only he held his father's hand tightly, as though he feared to lose him.

I closed the door and left them together. Olga and I sat together for a long time in our

pretty salon, talking over the strange week we had passed. Olga seemed as though she could not make enough of me.

'Aunt Catherine,' she said softly, as she looked at me, 'do you know how tired you look? You have lost your nice, pretty colour, and it is all with nursing Reggie. I do not wonder a bit that Mr. Fleming is so grateful.'

'I think the hot weather has tried me; but I shall be able to rest now. Olga, you have no idea how thoughtful Mr. Fleming is; I never saw anyone so unselfish. He says that he will not be in our way at all, and that if I will let him spend an hour with Reggie in the morning, and another in the evening, he will be quite content—that he is perfectly happy to let me have him.'

'I suppose he means to resume his old Bohemian life at the pavilion; it will be very dull for him.'

'We cannot help that,' I returned quickly. 'Olga, I have been wanting to ask you something for days—how long will Jem's holiday tutorship last?'

'Only for another week, Aunt Catherine.'

'Well, do you know, my dear, I have been thinking that it would be a good plan if I were to ask Jem to join us here. I shall still have to leave you so much alone, and if I have to stay

here much longer, they may be wanting you back at Fircroft, and then Jem will be useful as an escort.'

I saw her colour rise, but she answered with her usual gentleness :

'Oh yes, and Jem may be able to help you. You must do as you like about all that, Aunt Catherine. I am very happy here, and it will be hard to leave you and Reggie ; but if you think it best—well, of course it is for you to decide ;' and then, as we heard footsteps moving overhead, we said no more on the subject.

CHAPTER V.

LA RUE D'EGLISE.

'We are ourselves
Our heaven and our hell—the joy, the penalty,
The yearning, the fruition. Earth is hell
Or heaven.'

'*The Epic of Hades.*'

I HAD not made this suggestion about Jem without a great deal of thought; but it seemed to me the only way of solving my difficulties with regard to Olga. Reggie had wasted away to a little skeleton, and it would be weeks before he regained strength. During that time I should be responsible for him, and as most of the nursing would still devolve on me, Olga would be left a good deal alone. Once or twice the thought had crossed my mind that one of the sisters from the hospital might be induced to take charge of Reggie; but when it came to the point I felt reluctant to give him up. He was

so little trouble now ; and I had Olga to help me. As he grew better he would lie happily for hours playing with the flowers his father brought him, or cuddling a tiny white kitten that Olga had discovered about the place.

Mr. Fleming kept strictly to his two daily visits, and I generally took advantage of them —by indulging in a stroll with Olga to our favourite point. During the remainder of the day he walked or sketched, or sat reading in the kitchen-garden. He had meant to resume his old Bohemian life—dining at a restaurant, or preparing his own meals ; but I had taken all these arrangements into my own hands. I could not bear to think of him shifting for himself ; besides, I knew his purse was growing empty, and he could not leave Reggie and go back to work. I had secured a helper for Jeanne in the person of a stout, bright-eyed girl, who was just then looking for a situation. Her name was Marie, and, among her other duties, I gave her the care of the pavilion, as Madame Perrot still wantonly neglected her lodger. During its master's brief absence she swept and dusted and kept it tidy. Marie, too, conveyed his meals across to him when Olga and I sat down to ours. I was afraid every day that he would remonstrate with me on the subject, and kept purposely out of his way ; but for a little while

he held his peace. But one evening he left off playing with Reggie rather earlier than usual, and followed me into the garden. I saw directly by his manner that he wanted to speak to me, and I determined to give him the opportunity.

'Have you said good-night to Reggie, Mr. Fleming?'

'Yes; Miss Leigh is with him. I took the liberty of asking her to go to him. Miss Sefton, there is something I must say to you: how long is this sort of thing to go on?'

'Do you mean about Reggie? Mr. Dodd thinks that I may bring him downstairs to-morrow; the change will be good for him—he is going on so nicely; but of course he is still very weak.'

'Oh, it is not about Reggie! that is not what I mean, at all; but how long am I to go on living on your bounty? Do you know,' and here a dark flush crossed his face—a flush of bitter humiliation, 'that I wrote last week to my wife for some money? she has means of getting it for me—for her brother is not poor; and her answer was—and of course he dictated it: "You have played at being the idle gentleman long enough; it is time you and the boy came back. George has no money to spare just now. I wonder you are not ashamed to ask him." I told her how ill Reggie

had been ; but she takes no notice. I dare say she has forgotten all about it.'

'Mr. Fleming, there was no need to write to England. I can lend you any money you want for present use.'

'Do you think I would ask you to lend me a franc ?' he replied ; and nothing could be prouder than his look. 'Do I not owe you enough already ?'

'You owe me nothing.'

'Oh no !' with a little laugh ; 'it is of course absolutely nothing at all that you do for me ; it is not the life of an enchanted prince that I am leading at present—oh no ! When I come in from my walk, I find my hermitage swept and garnished ; not a speck of dust anywhere ; fresh flowers ; a new book—even the paper. Sometimes I catch a glance of the substantial-looking fairy who had worked in my service.'

'Oh, you mean Marie. Yes, she is a nice creature ! and, then, she finds so little to do here.'

'Once I had to cater for myself ; to go into cheap restaurants ; to boil smoky water for my coffee ; to fetch my own milk and eggs from the farm ; now I sit in my garden with my hands folded and wait. I know that at an appointed hour Marie will appear with her tray. I shall dine and sup like a king ! my coffee is fragrant

and rich with cream! Miss Sefton, I ask again how long is this going on—how long?' and here he drew a long breath. 'Am I to receive and not be suffocated with all this kindness?'

I would not answer him lightly—he was too much in earnest for that.

'Mr. Fleming, do you know I think the generosity is on your side, not mine? You are so good to let me have Reggie; we were growing dull at La Maisonnette, and a child is such a boon to two women, and you never complain now of being lonely without him.'

'I hope I am not quite so selfish as all that,' he replied gravely; 'but, Miss Sefton, there is one thing more that I must ask. Reggie is so much better now, and yet Mr. Dodd comes to see him every day, and it will not do to run up a long bill.'

'Do not trouble yourself about that,' I replied; 'that is my affair.'

'I do not understand,' he returned; and I could tell at once by his manner that I had said the wrong thing, for he seemed to stiffen in a moment. 'I hope you do not mean that Mr. Dodd will not wait a little until I can settle his account; there will be no difficulty about that matter if he will only give me time; there are ways and means, and I am not afraid of work.'

'Mr. Fleming,' I said after a moment's hesitation, for I did not dare pursue that subject, 'you have never told me what your business is. I hope I am not impertinent in asking; but I know you will give me credit for a good motive.'

'You have asked rather an awkward question,' he returned with a quick, nervous laugh. 'I belong to the unemployed at present. When I first went to Oxford, it was with the intention of studying for the Bar; but, like a fool, I threw away all my prospects in life by marrying. Oh! I must tell you about all that some day. You should hear it all now, only I have to go down to St. Croix for that medicine Mr. Dodd forgot to bring, and it is growing late; but I can tell you as much as this: when I committed that cursed folly of marrying at one-and-twenty, I had to take the first thing that offered—a mastership at Highgate. The pay was poor enough; but we managed to live within our means, until Aline—well, never mind about that. I had to throw it up in a hurry, and then we had to fall back upon her brother.'

'Do you mean that you lived with him?'

'Yes; Aline is there now. He—Mr. Barton—is not a gentleman; he does not understand how a man of my education feels about things.

His business—well, it is retail, and,' with a proud curl of his lip, 'it was not likely I could mix myself up with that sort of concern. Of course, there are misunderstandings; we are not on the same plane, George and I; but, in his way, he is good to us. He is trying to get me a clerkship now, as other things have failed; so I am only doing a little literary work at present—writing articles for one or two papers: sometimes they give me a book to review. I am expecting to be paid for one or two things soon; that is why I asked Aline to advance me the money.'

'Then, in that case, Mr. Fleming, you can surely allow me to be your banker?' But he only shook his head.

'People who live like enchanted princes do not require a very long purse,' he returned, with a smile. 'I am my own banker at present; I only wish you to know the real state of affairs. Now I must go. When may I talk to you again?'

'Shall we go on the common to-morrow evening? perhaps there may be a sunset.'

'Very well, then; I will fetch you. I must wish you good-night now.'

He looked at me wistfully, and a great sadness seemed to come into his eyes, but he did not say any more. The next minute the little

gate swung back on its hinges, and I saw him striding down the path towards the pavilion.

The next morning, as I was sitting with Reggie writing my letters, while he played with some paper figures his father had cut out to amuse him, Olga came quickly into the room.

'Aunt Catherine,' she said, and there was a little excitement in her manner, 'I want to speak to you a moment. Do you know Monsieur Lefevre has come back, and that his brother is dead?'

I almost started at the name. Reggie's illness, and my interest in Mr. Fleming, had made me almost forget why I had come to St. Croix; but with Olga's words came a sudden rush of recollection.

'How do you know? who has told you?' for to my knowledge Olga had not quitted La Maisonnette that morning.

'It was Marie. I was talking to her just now while I warmed Reggie's beef-tea—you know I like to air my French, Aunt Catherine—and Marie is a nice, sensible girl. We were talking about St. Sulpice, and she had been relating some wonderful legend about that image of the Madonna and Child in the Lady Chapel, and then she mentioned Père Lefevre's name. "He told me that when I confessed to him

on Friday," were her words. Of course I questioned her very closely; and it is true: he came back last Wednesday, his brother is buried, and they had Masses said for the repose of his soul at St. Sulpice. Marie said Père Lefevre looked very worn and sad.'

'Olga, I must go to him this afternoon!'

'I knew you would say that,' she replied. 'Oh yes, you must go, Aunt Catherine, and I will take care of Reggie.' And then she continued gently: 'It seems as though we have forgotten Basil lately; but it is not really so, only dear little Reggie has engrossed all our thoughts.'

That was true, but I would not allow that Basil had been forgotten. I could not eat my luncheon that day, and the moment it was over I set off for St. Croix, quite disregarding Olga's entreaties that I would walk slowly and not fatigue myself. What did fatigue or heat matter if only I could come at last face to face with Père Lefevre, and learn from him whether Basil were dead or living! I recall that walk now with a feeling of surprise. I was so sure that Monsieur Lefevre would help me. I had no fears, no misgivings; the time of suspense was over. In a day or two Virginia would know all—whether she were the mother of a living son or not.

I remember, as I climbed the steep cliff path, how beautiful the bay looked beneath me. The children were playing on the yellow sands, filling their little pails full of bright amber seaweed. I could hear them calling to each other. By-and-by I passed the hospital and the cemetery; a young widow was kneeling beside one of the graves. How long that walk seemed to me! but at last I reached La Rue d'Eglise, and stood again before the tall, narrow house. It seemed months since I last stood there talking to the solemn-faced young priest. The friendly housekeeper seemed pleased to see me.

'Ah! here is madame again,' she said with a smile, 'and le bon père is actually within. That is well, after the many times madame has been turned from the door. Ah, there is need for patience in this world!' Would madame enter at once? and she would tell her master.

I stood for a minute in the little dark passage. I could hear her talking volubly, and a man's voice answering. Then she returned, and ushered me into a small room with a window overlooking St. Sulpice. Père Lefevre was writing. He rose at once, with a profound bow.

'Madame has desired to see me,' he said in a smooth, polished voice, as he offered me a chair. 'I fear, from what Marthe tells me,

that my long absence has been of great inconvenience to madame. Alas! affairs not of my ordering have detained me! Such things are in the hands of le bon Dieu.'

I looked at Père Lefevre as he delivered himself of this little speech. He had a meagre. spare figure, but his face was pleasing; the dark, sunken eyes were keen and intelligent. He was evidently a gentleman. His manner was suave and gentle, and at once put me at my ease. Perhaps he saw how nervous I was, for he went on to speak of his brother's death, and gave me a little sketch of the end, which enabled me to recover myself.

'And now madame must tell me how I can serve her,' he said at last.

In reply, I gave him a brief summary of our history. I told him Virginia's sad story; the misery of her married life; her flight to England, and desertion of her child; her diseased and lifelong terror of her husband.

'If she could only be certain of his death, I think there would be some peace for her remaining years,' I observed in conclusion. 'And if she could only gain some clue that might aid her in her search for her son, it would give her fresh life.'

'And her husband's name is Paul Lyndhurst?' he asked as soon as I had paused. He

had listened to my story with grave attention. Only once, when I first mentioned Paul's name, he had looked up with a surprised air, and his keen glance seemed to read me through and through. 'It is very strange,' he muttered; and then he had composed himself to listen.

'Yes, monsieur,' I returned, in answer to his question; 'and the report has reached us that you attended his death-bed.'

'Did your informant state where Monsieur Lyndhurst died?'

'He believed at a village near Geneva; but there is no one of that name interred there—the whole account is confused.'

Monsieur Lefevre shook his head.

'I was never in the neighbourhood of Geneva in my life. Madame's informant is altogether wrong. Paul Lyndhurst—le bon Dieu have mercy on his soul!—lies in the cemetery at St. Croix. Madame may see his grave there if she will.'

I clasped my hands; the blood seemed to rush to my heart.

'Mon père, is this really true? Oh, it is grievous to rejoice that anyone is dead!—but if you only knew!'

'My daughter,' he said kindly, 'it is not always easy to grieve when death takes our enemy. Human nature is weak. We are not

all saints. I know enough of this unfortunate man to understand what you feel.'

'But when—when did he die?'

He thought a moment.

'I should say it was nearly ten years ago.'

Ten years! Virginia had been free ten years, and we had not known it!

'Shall I tell madame what I know?' And, as I looked at him imploringly, he went on: 'It was after vespers one evening, as I was leaving St. Sulpice, that an old peasant woman accosted me. I knew her by name; she was old Nanette Duclos, who lived with her half-witted son in the little tumble-down cottage in the narrow alley that leads out of the Rue Dominique. It has been pulled down long since. She had a strange story to tell me. An Englishman, an artist, was lying ill—she believed dying—in her house. He had been seized with a sort of fit at her door a week previously, and, with the Divine charity one sees among the poor, she had nursed and tended him ever since.

'"Mon père, he is not one of us; he has known better days," she said. "He cannot eat our food, and all he asks for is brandy; and he is dying; and he does not believe in le bon Dieu, or in the blessed Mary. And he lies there cursing, and no one can make him be

silent. And he has almost frightened my poor Pierre to death."

'I went with her at once, and I found Nanette had not exaggerated matters. When I stepped up to the miserable bed, and looked in the face of the man who lay there, I knew at once that he was dying.'

'Mon père, will you describe him to me?'

'My daughter, it is not easy after all these years, and I have seen many dying men since; but I can recall a little. It was a handsome face—the features finely cut, but wasted by disease, and with all the evil passions stamped on it. He looked fiercely at me as I entered. "What do we want with priests?" I heard him say; "I never believed in them."

'I had some difficulty in entering into conversation with him. His manner continued defiant, and his oaths and curses made one's flesh creep to hear him; but our Holy Church teaches us how to deal with such cases: I must win him through his miserable appetites. I gained his attention at last by promising to send him a better bed, and, if the doctor permitted it, some good wine.

'He ceased to glare at me; a more human expression came over his face. "Why, you are not such a bad sort, after all!" he said, with an air of extreme surprise. "I never thought a

French priest could be such a sensible fellow. Come! I call that behaving like a gentleman. Now, I don't mind entering into a compact with you. Just see after a few comforts for me, and I will undertake to listen to as many sermons as you care to preach to me."

'I knew better than to argue with him. There was a fierce, unsettled light in his eyes, which resembled insanity. I thought it prudent to return a soothing answer, and withdrew under the plea of bringing the doctor. When I returned it was with a physician; but, as I surmised, there was little to be done.

'"Yes, he is dying, poor fellow!" was his report as he joined me in the room below. "This is a case for you, not me. He cannot last many days."

'"Is it your opinion," I asked, "that the man is deranged?"

'He shrugged his shoulders. "It is not his fault that he is still sane; he has drunk pretty nearly all his senses away. As far as I can tell, he has lived on brandy, and nothing else. He is calling out for it now."

'"You do not mean that I am to give it him?"

'"Certainly—but in small doses—unless he is to collapse at once. I tell you, the poor wretch has made it his food for months; he will suffer

tortures for the want of it; and, after all, nothing matters now; he is a dead man."

'"In that case, I will give him a little," and I went up at once. He almost snatched the cup from my hand in his wolfish eagerness. "Oh, that is good—that is life!" he cried, as he drained it. "Give me some more, and I will call you a good fellow!" But he swore at me when I carried the bottle away.

'Madame, I need not trouble you with all the miserable recital. We poor priests know how hard it is to win these wandering souls. He was a great sinner; but God is good, and I would not lose hope. I surrounded him with comforts: he had a clean bed, fresh linen; one of our good sisters nursed him; we induced him to take a little soup; the doctor had given him an anodyne; he suffered less; his temper improved. Sometimes he would talk to me; by degrees I got him to tell me his story. My daughter, some things I regard as under the seal of confession. A life such as his could not be edifying.'

'I understand, Père Lefevre, far too well. Heaven forbid that the evil record of Paul Lyndhurst's life should pollute a woman's ear!'

The good father went on:

'By degrees he softened perceptibly. My attentions pleased him; he was grateful for the

alleviations and comforts I was able to procure for him. In spite of his recklessness, a terror of the black future that yawned before his sinful soul at times haunted him; then he would speak to me of the past.'

'Did he mention his wife?'

'A little. He told me one day he had married a young English heiress for her money; and that, to his disgust, her father had disinherited her. "She was a handsome girl," he observed; "but I was never in love with her. I cared far more for the little Pauline I deserted. She was always whining about her own people. I grew weary of her at last. It was a mistake for a man of my calibre to tie himself down to matrimony; she lost her good looks, too, when the boy came. Ah, well! I was drunk one night, and I believe we had a bit of a quarrel. Anyhow, she left me with the brat on my hands, and that is all I know about it."'

'But, mon père, why did he not seek her for his own interest? To be sure, my father was alive for many years after that, and would have protected her against him; but, still, it seems strange that he should have made no attempt to possess himself of her fortune.'

'I believe he was hopeless on the subject, and, as you say, madame, your father lived for many years after your sister returned to him. As far

as I can make out from a very disjointed narrative, the unfortunate man rejoiced in his freedom; the child was an incubus, but he bore with him for a time, intending by-and-by to rid himself of him by sending him back to his mother. Meanwhile, things went on from bad to worse; his habits grew more depraved; he had an attack of delirium tremens, and was removed to a hospital. On his recovery he suddenly remembered his boy; from the first he had taken very little notice of him, and but for the care of the faithful bonne the little creature would have fared badly. He was told now that during his illness they had been befriended by an English clergyman who was travelling for his health; that this unknown benefactor had literally fed and clothed the child, and that a strong affection had grown up between them; and that this good friend desired nothing less than to take the boy back with him to England, and to bring him up as his adopted son.

'I will give you Paul Lyndhurst's own words:

'"I was glad to be rid of him; and a feeling of revenge against the woman who deserted me made me determined not to send him back to the Hall. If Virginia wanted him, she must make terms with me, Paul Lyndhurst. I wanted to go into Italy, and a child and nurse were not to my taste. I had an interview with

his reverence, and in the end I said, 'Leave me your address, and when I want Basil I will send for him; until then you are welcome to him;' for, you see, I did not mean to part with the boy out and out. One day he would be rich—I did not forget that."

'And now I am coming to the strangest part of all. By his own account, Paul Lyndhurst lived a wild, reckless life in Rome and Naples, but one day he heard of the death of his father-in-law; it had happened long before, but in his wanderings the news had failed to reach him.

'If his father-in-law were dead, Basil—his son Basil—must be his grandfather's heir. He must claim him at once; there was no time to be lost. Madame, this wretched man was actually on his way to England to seek his son when his fate overtook him, and he was taken ill at Nanette's door.'

'Mon père, tell me quickly the name of the clergyman.'

But Père Lefevre shook his head.

'My daughter, how am I to tell you? No names were mentioned at all between us. With the cunning that seemed to belong to him, Paul Lyndhurst never once pronounced the name of his father-in-law, the Hall, or the English priest. "To-morrow you shall

write to his reverence," he said. "No, I have no address about me; but I never forget anything. Yes; to-morrow you shall write." Alas! madame, when the morrow came the nurse who was sitting by him heard a slight sound, but before she could reach him he was dead!'

'Dead! Oh no, mon père—not without telling you where Basil was?'

'Alas! yes, my daughter; we buried him here. Paul Lyndhurst—that was all we could put. We could find no trace of writing—nothing that could prove his wild story. Sometimes I have imagined it was the creation of his fancy—the outcome of delirium; there were times when he did not seem sane; how did I know whether this Basil had an existence? Just to satisfy my conscience, I inserted in an English paper the death of Paul Lyndhurst, and added my name; nothing came of it, and voilà tout, madame.'

He looked at me compassionately, as though he feared I should be overwhelmed with disappointment; but I started from my seat.

'Mon père, it was an English clergyman who adopted Basil?'

'Yes, certainly; so it was affirmed.'

'Then in that case it will be easy to discover Basil. We can advertise; there can be no difficulty in that; our lawyer shall put the

matter in hand at once—it shall be in every paper; Basil's adopted father will soon be found. Oh, I have hope now!'

'It would be better still if madame could find the bonne. Oh, if we only knew her name!'

'Ah, as to that, mon père—Lizette must be an old woman now. Perhaps she is not living.'

'What name did you say, my daughter?' he asked quietly.

'Lizette Dupont.'

'There was a woman of that name living with her grand-daughter in the Rue Anglaise. Tenez, madame, permit me to ascertain whether she be still living. If you will give me your address, I will write to you.'

I gave him the address, and with many thanks took leave of him. The good old man accompanied me to the door, and gave me his blessing. It was too late to do anything more; to-morrow I must visit the cemetery and read the name, Paul Lyndhurst, for myself; but now I must return to La Maisonnette. Olga would be growing uneasy at my delay. A fiacre passed me; I hailed the driver and jumped in, and throwing myself back on the shabby cushions, I closed my eyes wearily, and gave myself up to reflection on the miserable story I had just heard.

CHAPTER VI.

'THE EPIC OF HADES.'

'To cure thee of thy pride, that deepest-seated ill,
God humbled His own self—wilt thou thy pride keep still?
God humble, and man proud! Do angels, when they range
This earth, see any sight at once so sad and strange?
* * * * *
He knew, who healed our wounds, we quickly should be fain
Our old hurts to forget—so let the scars remain.'

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH.

As we drove down the lane I saw Olga standing at the gate. Her white gown and great red umbrella had quite a picturesque effect. She had a bunch of yellow roses in her hand; behind her were the brown gate and the sycamore-tree. The shutters had all been thrown back to admit the fresh evening breeze. Windows and doors were open, curtains fluttering. As I walked up the courtyard I had glimpses of the shady garden. Jeanne was coming from

the well with a green and yellow cruche. Her apron was filled with corn for the fowls. I could hear them clucking in expectation.

Olga drew me into the drawing-room. The little tea-table stood in one window, the big easy-chair beside it; there was a perfume of roses, and heliotrope, and mignonette. Olga put her arms softly round me.

'How tired you look, Aunt Catherine! and, yes, you have been crying; your eyes are quite wet. What is the matter, dear? Is it another disappointment? and you have been so long away—all the afternoon!'

I put up my hand to my face in some surprise. Were my eyes really wet? I knew nothing about it.

'Oh, it is all so sad,' I replied with a sigh; 'and Père Lefevre could tell me so little about Basil: only that when he was quite a baby—at least, not more than two years old—a clergyman took him to England and brought him up as his own son.'

I saw Olga start; she was pouring me out some tea, and her hand trembled so that she spilt some.

'Oh, how awkward I am!' she said with a little laugh; but her face was quite pale; 'but of course you know the clergyman's name? Père Lefevre will have told you.'

'That is just what he does not know himself,' I returned in a vexed tone—'neither his name nor the place where he lives. We shall have to advertise in the *Times* and the *Guardian*, and, indeed, in all the papers, until we find Basil's adopted father; but there is one thing I know, Olga, that, if you will, we may stand together to-morrow at the grave of Paul Lyndhurst.'

'Is he buried here?' she asked in an awe-struck voice. 'Oh, then, you have learned something this afternoon? Oh yes, we will go, and then you can really tell poor Mrs. Lyndhurst that you have seen his name, and that she need not fear him again. I think that she has never quite got rid of the terror that one day she might see him.'

'I know it was her mania; no one could persuade her out of it; that was why she would never leave the Hall for a single day. Poor dear Virginia! Dr. Langham said at last that it was hysteria; her nerves were too much worn; she could not be reasonable; but, Olga, think of the pity of it: he has been dead ten years, and Virginia did not know!'

'Ten years! do you think you can tell me all about it: Aunt Catherine, or are you too tired? Mr. Fleming is with Reggie, and he says that I am to let him know if you wish to go out with him this evening. It is not yet six; but if you

are too tired——' and she looked into my face very gravely.

'Oh, it is impossible! I could not listen to him to-night,' I said wearily; 'I should be thinking of that miserable story I have just heard, and how we are to find Basil. Mr. Fleming will not mind if I put him off until to-morrow.'

'He will not mind at all,' she returned quietly; 'it must be as you like, Aunt Catherine.'

'Then I would rather talk to you instead,' was my reply, and as she placed herself beside me, I related all that Père Lefevre had told me. Olga was always a good listener. It was not her way to interrupt people; but now she sat so motionless, with her face half hidden by her hand, that once or twice I stopped in my narrative.

'Go on; please tell me all,' she would say when I paused, and I would take up the thread again.

'It is horrible—horrible!' she exclaimed when I had finished; 'how can there be such God-forsaken souls anywhere when,' dropping her voice reverently—'when Christ has died. How very difficult life is, Aunt Catherine! One cannot understand.'

'It is a mystery,' I returned; 'there is so much that is unknowable. Some of us have to

stumble on in darkness all our lives ; the light is hidden from our eyes. How do we know ? Just at the last God may have spoken to him ; He may have heard and answered. It is never for us to judge between the most sinful soul and its Creator.'

'You are right, Aunt Catherine. I like your merciful creed : people are too prone to judge, to pronounce condemnation. Do not talk about it any more ; I can see how it has tried you. There is something I want to show you that I think will interest you. Mr. Fleming lent me a book to-day, because he said I should be dull without you, and he brought it across this afternoon. It is the "Epic of Hades." I remember you liked it so much ; but I have not read a page yet.'

'It is a very good book,' I replied as I took it carelessly. Evidently Olga wanted to distract my thoughts ; but I was not in the humour to discuss the 'Epic of Hades.' I opened it at random, just noting the pencil-marks on the margin of the pages ; favourite passages had been underlined. It had been well read. At last I turned to the title-page, and then an involuntary exclamation escaped me. Olga was watching me ; she drew a long breath of relief.

'You recognise it, then, Aunt Catherine ?'

Recognise it ! how many years had passed

since I had seen that handwriting? Six-and-twenty years—nay, more—and I had been a girl then; but I knew it at once. It was not a handwriting that could be easily forgotten. It was characteristic of its owner—large, benevolent, and yet a trifle angular, betraying a marked individuality and originality.

'Basil Fleming, from his affectionate friend, Robert Lucas Fleming, St. Mark's, Leeds.' This was all.

Olga left me and went outside for a few minutes. She wanted me to recover myself; but I could only sit there looking at that one name—Robert. I was impatient at myself at last at this emotion after half a lifetime of silence. Oh, what fools we women are! The hair grows gray while the heart is young; there are wrinkles on the face, and the pulses still beat as quickly. Why are we so slow to learn our lesson—that youth has fled and taken all our precious things with it; that between us and them there is a gulf fixed? It was not the Robert Fleming I once knew who had written those few words. This was an older Robert—a man who had grown gray in his Master's service. Only his handwriting was the same.

'Good-bye, Catherine—my Catherine,' had been his last words to me; 'it is not God's will that we should be happy together; not yet—not

in this world. Let us try to submit ourselves ;' and then he had left me. Had he lived single for my sake, as I for his, or had any other woman become dear to him ? He had not married, that was all I knew.

'Aunt Catherine,' and Olga touched me gently, 'do you feel better now ? Oh, I know I have given you a shock ; and his name is Basil.'

I was so bewildered that I could not take in her meaning. I read the inscription again : 'Basil Fleming, from his affectionate friend, Robert Lucas Fleming.' To be sure, what could it mean ?

'Is it—can it be Basil—your Basil, Aunt Catherine ?' she whispered in my ear.

I put my hands on her shoulders, and almost pushed her away in my excitement. I did not seem as though I could understand, and yet——

'Do you not see,' she continued gently, 'how strangely it all seems to fit in ? A clergyman in England has adopted him ; he may even have given him his name. It is your Mr. Fleming, and perhaps Basil——'

But I would not let her go on.

'How do we know ? Olga, it is not possible ! Why do you excite me like this ? Are there no other Basils in England ? No, you must not delude me with such hopes !'

'But if it be true, Aunt Catherine ?'

'How do I know that it is true? How do I know anything until he tells me? Oh, I was wrong to say I would not go out with him! I cannot sleep until he answers this question: What have he and Robert Fleming to do with each other?'

'Dear Aunt Catherine, you shall ask him that question; but you must not agitate yourself like this. You will frighten Mr. Fleming, and he will not know how to talk to you.'

'But, Olga, if what you suspect is true, and he is really Basil——'

And then I could say no more, but could only cling to Olga and weep; for it seemed to me as though it could not be true that Providence had not this rich gift in store for us; that it must be a dream, a hallucination; that, after all, we must be deceiving ourselves. Robert Fleming might only be a friend—a chance acquaintance. Were there not other Basils in England? I was so shaken, so bewildered with it all, that I could only cry softly to myself.

Olga behaved beautifully; she made me lean against her, and only said a quiet, soothing word at intervals. It might not be true; I must not distress myself; but it would be nice to hear about an old friend, and perhaps Mr. Fleming could tell me about him; 'and even

—even if he be the wrong Basil, perhaps your Mr. Fleming will help you to find him,' she finished.

Just at this moment we heard footsteps descending the little wooden staircase. I sat up at once and tried to compose myself, and Olga looked at me in a questioning manner.

'Shall I call him?' she whispered; but as I hesitated the footsteps came nearer; there was a quick, light tap at the door, and Mr. Fleming came into the room.

'Reggie is asleep,' he began, 'and I wanted to know——' and then he stopped and looked at us both. 'I am intruding; you are not well, Miss Sefton. I beg your pardon.'

'Aunt Catherine is very tired,' whispered Olga.

She wished to shield me, but I put her aside almost impatiently.

'What does it matter if I am tired? Mr. Fleming, I should like to walk with you to the Point; the air will do me good.'

'Are you sure that you are quite fit for it?' he returned, with such an air of concern that the tears rushed to my eyes again. 'Something has been troubling you. Miss Leigh looks anxious,' with a quick glance at her.

Olga's colour rose a little, but she was quite equal to the situation.

'You are right; Aunt Catherine has been agitated. She has much to trouble her. If she would only keep quiet until to-morrow! but it is for her to decide.'

'I should like to go,' I replied quickly; but my limbs trembled as I rose from my seat.

I saw Olga and Mr. Fleming exchange looks, but neither of them said a word. Olga brought me my bonnet, and wrapped a little shawl round me, and Mr. Fleming quietly gave me his arm.

'Perhaps the air will be the best tonic, after all,' he said, as we turned into the field-path; but I made no answer.

The book was still in my hand; I was thinking how I could ask him that question. Mr. Fleming became silent in his turn. We passed the firs, and strolled quietly down the little path that led to the Point. As soon as we had reached it, he spread the rug Olga had given him, and then placed himself at my feet. The shore beneath us was strangely still this evening; the tide was low, and the stretch of yellow sands, with the gray boulders and masses of bright-coloured seaweed, seemed bare and empty; one could hear the soft lapping of the water. A bell was tinkling from the hospital on the cliff; a little boat with a red sail was coming across the bay; the opposite shore seemed bathed in a strange silvery light. Mr.

Fleming drew his gray cap over his eyes; a long sigh escaped him.

'And I have to talk about myself?' he said in a voice of suppressed bitterness.

'Yes,' I replied; 'but not just now. 'I want you to tell me something else first;' and I pushed the book towards him as I spoke. 'I want you to tell me how you came to know Robert Fleming?'

My question seemed to surprise him; he looked at the inscription, and then at me.

'Do you know him?' he asked in a tone of excessive astonishment. 'He has never spoken of you to me—never; and I knew all his friends.'

'Perhaps not. I have not seen him since I was a girl; it is not likely that he would mention me. But this is not the question. What I want to know is your relationship to Robert Fleming.'

'Then I will tell you in a few words. In one sense there is no relationship between us; in another, I owe him everything. When I was a child—a poor neglected little creature with no one to care for me but an ignorant peasant woman, who was my bonne—he adopted me, educated me, and brought me up as his own son. My dear lady, what ails you? you are ill! please let me fetch Miss Leigh——'

'No, no!' I gasped; 'it is nothing; let me be quiet a moment; it will pass;' but as I hid my face in my hands a sob escaped me. 'O my God! it is Basil,' I said to myself, and a sort of giddiness came over me. I had a dim consciousness that my hands were drawn away very gently, and that my dear boy was chafing them in his own.

'They are icy cold,' I heard him murmur; 'what can be the matter?'

After a time I recovered myself. Yes, I could listen now; the faintness had passed.

'I am better,' I said, trying to smile. 'I am so sorry I frightened you. I suppose Olga was right, and I have tired myself.'

'But you will let me take you home now?' he said in a caressing voice.

'Not for worlds,' I replied firmly; 'it was only giddiness; it has quite left me. I am perfectly comfortable here with this nice stone to rest against, and it is so quiet. I am longing to hear your story. When Mr. Fleming adopted you, did he give you his name at the same time?'

'I will tell you all I know; but that is very little. Mr. Fleming was travelling abroad when he found me. He noticed me first, and then the people of the house told him about me. My father was in a hospital. I had no one

belonging to me but my bonne; the poor creature was in great trouble and perplexity. She had no money, and but for the kindness of strangers we should have starved. "I permit them to occupy the garret," the mistress of the house told him; "but I tell Lizette that she must apply to the Maire. I have children of my own to clothe and feed." I was too young to remember this time; but Mr. Fleming has often recalled the day when he came up to our garret, and how I ran across the floor to him and clasped him round the knees, and called him daddy.'

'"My heart went out to you then, Basil," he has said to me since, "when I lifted you up and you laid your dark curly head against me, and I felt your childish arms round my neck. We were fast friends from that hour, and never a day passed without a visit to the garret."

'I was a mere baby; but I certainly remember a tall man who took out his watch to show me, and who brought me playthings and bonbons, and how I climbed on his knee, and called him daddy.

'One day he took me in his arms. "I am your father now, Basil," he said to me; "you are given to me." Later on, when I could understand, he explained to me that my own father

had gone away, and had given me into my friend's keeping.

'"You are to live with me, and be my little boy until he comes to fetch you," that was all he ever told me of my father; and once, when I asked why my name was Fleming, he told me my father had not wished me to bear his name; but he never hinted at any reason.'

'And Mr. Fleming brought you to England?'

'Yes, and I remember I was sea-sick, and cried for my bonne; everything else was indistinct. One of my earliest recollections was playing with a Dandy Dinmont called Pepper on the hearthrug, and of a nice motherly young woman whom I called Martha, and who washed and dressed me with her own children. And I remember that I always slept in a little bed in Mr. Fleming's room, and that I cried if the watch were not under my pillow—but I shall weary you?'

'No, no! if you only knew how every little detail interests me!'

'You are very good to listen to me at all,' he replied in a low tone; 'but I need not linger over these early days. Mr. Fleming had brought me to his own lodgings. He lived in a road leading to St. Mark's. It was a high narrow house, and had a long strip of

garden at the back, where we youngsters played. Mr. Fleming lives there still.'

'And he is still the curate of St. Mark's.'

'Yes,' with a quick glance at me, as though my trembling voice arrested his attention, 'he is the senior curate; there are two others; it is a large parish, and a very poor one. Once or twice a country living has been offered him; but he has always refused it. He says he will live and die at St. Mark's among his poor people. I have heard it said that when Mr. Carbert dies —he is the vicar, and an old man now—the bishop will offer the living to Mr. Fleming.'

'Will he accept it?'

'Most certainly he will; the position will just suit him; there is not a man, woman, or child that he does not know, and they are all devoted to him. "Our Mr. Fleming," that is what they call him.'

'And all these years he has been poor?'

'Not so very poor,' he answered quickly; 'he had a little money left to him before he adopted me, and this enabled him to send me to a good school, and afterwards to Oxford. He grudged me nothing, and yet he spent absolutely nothing on himself.'

'And he is living still in the old house at Gresham Street?'

'Yes, do you know it?' in some surprise.

'No. 27; and Martha still takes care of him. Her husband is dead, and all her children except Patience are married and out in the world.'

'And you have lived with him there all these years, Basil?'

The name escaped me involuntarily. I saw him look at me, and a smile came to his lips.

'How strange to hear you call me that! but I like it—I like it.'

'I beg your pardon,' I returned in some confusion.

'Do I not tell you I like it?' was the reproachful answer. 'I wish you would always call me Basil. Yes, I lived with him off and on until I married. We were very comfortable; we had a big room running from front to back. Mr. Fleming kept all his books in the back part, and we called it the study. We had a round table and some big arm-chairs in the front part, and that was our dining-room. I never seemed to interrupt him; he would write his sermons while I smoked or played with Scamp, who was Pepper's successor. When he came in tired from his labours in the parish he always seemed to like to see me there. "There you are, Basil," I can hear him say now; "just help me off with my coat, there's a good lad, and let us be comfortable." Oh, those were happy days!' he finished with a groan.

'And he sent you to Oxford?'

'Yes; I was giving him trouble, and he hardly knew what to do with me. Public-school life had turned me out a restless, conceited sort of fellow, with a strong belief in my own brilliant abilities, and a lofty disdain for what I called narrow opinions. My success at school had spoilt me. I had grown up self-willed, with a dangerous love of pleasure, and a decided tendency to choose my friends for amusement rather than edification; any opposition, any attempt to guide and restrain these weak and evil inclinations, only irritated me; even the mild advice and loving admonitions of my dearest friend only excited my impatience. I remember how often I ended an argument with the remark, "We of the younger generation think otherwise, Mr. Fleming. Thank goodness! we live in a more enlightened age," and I remember how his grieved silence was his only answer.

'I had gained a scholarship, and as my great wish was to go to Oxford and afterwards to study for the Bar, it was decided that I should go to Exeter. The evening before I left Leeds he spoke to me with unusual seriousness; he mentioned my faults one by one, and implored me to struggle against them; he warned me of the temptations of University life. "Your pride

and love of popularity will lead you into danger, Basil," he said. "With your pleasure-loving temperament, and, pardon me if I speak plainly, your self-indulgence and dislike of denying yourself any present gratification, you will certainly fall into serious difficulties unless your corrective be hard work and the friendship of men worth knowing. My boy, for eighteen years you have been my one thought; do not disappoint me!"

'I was in a softened mood that evening, and I listened to him with unwonted patience. I remember telling myself as I went up to my little room that he would have reason to be proud of me—that I would distinguish myself at Oxford. I fell asleep and dreamed I was on the Woolsack. I was full of spirits the next morning, and quoted the dream as a favourable augury of the future. Mr. Fleming only shook his head.

'"My boy," he said sadly, "I do not believe in auguries; I would rather have you a good man than see you Chancellor of England."'

'He was right,' I murmured.

'Yes, he was right, I know it now; but I was a self-willed young fool then; I would not learn my lesson until bitter experience taught it to me. At that time I preferred the devil's teach-

ing. Miss Sefton, it was an evil day that I went to Oxford; but I mean to pass over my year at Exeter very quickly. I do not wish to shock your ears, and the retrospect of this part of my life is very painful to me.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE END OF A SUMMER IDYL.

'I require no argument to urge me to be kind to a pretty woman.'

'*Fair Maid of Perth.*'

'A wilful man must have his way.'

'*The Antiquary.*'

All this time the strain on my mind and attention had been terrible. I had followed every word with famished eagerness. How often in the old days had I wearied Heaven with prayers that the silence between us might be broken, and that I might at least have the consolation of hearing something of the life Robert Fleming was leading. But it is one of the sad mysteries that seem to wall in human souls in tangible darkness that such prayers are often left unanswered. And yet if we would only wait long enough, if the precious ointment of our faith were not all poured out upon our idols, if we could believe that the blackness

of our cloud would be relieved by a silvery lining, if we would possess our souls in patience instead of lashing them into wild rebellion, it might still be well with us!

Oh, it was easy for the middle-aged Catherine to preach philosophy! But for the young, girlish Catherine, stretching out her hands with pitiful yearning for the birthright of happiness —the rightful heritage of her youth—it was not quite so easy. One cannot see through blinding tears. A bruised heart cannot moralize.

If only Basil would have told me more! Oh yes, I called him Basil to myself with a strange thrill and lingering over the word! I hardly dared look at him for fear he read the truth in my eyes.

'You are my boy and hers!' That is what I longed to say to him. But I must hear his story first. If only he would have told me more of that life in Gresham Street! But, with a man's impatience of details, he was hurrying on to a more marked episode of his existence. I noticed that as he began to speak again he turned his face aside; but I could see his features working. A sombre and gloomy light had come into his eyes.

'I commenced my University life with Mr. Fleming's warning ringing in my ears. Before many months had passed it was more than

verified. I was considered the most popular man in college. I had a host of acquaintances, but few friends. Sober-minded reading men avoided my company; but all the wild, versatile youths gathered round me, and helped me to waste time and substance. Not in the riotous living of the prodigal—thank Heaven I never fell so low as that!—but in unprofitable discussions. in festive gatherings that unfitted me for my work.

'Many of my friends were unsettled in their views; to them there was nothing sacred in heaven and earth. I did not openly avow myself an Agnostic, or a follower of the black philosophy, but the simple truths I had been taught by a good man seemed to shrink into nothingness. "What do we want with creeds?" they would say. "The people are not to be led in leading-strings any longer; natural religion is all that we want." Oh, it makes me sick to remember the cant phrases of our soulless philosophy—utter negation, absolute impossibility of knowledge, of the finite mind measuring the infinite! This is what we taught, fools that we were—sifting our puny knowledge, as the child digs his little pit in the sand to hold the ocean!

'When I went home for my first vacation, Mr. Fleming received me with an air of re-

straint. He looked worn and anxious, and, though his affection for me was evidently the same as ever, the old unrestrained intercourse seemed impossible. Often I saw him look at me sadly, as though he were waiting for my confidence, but no word of reproach passed his lips. Alas! for the first time, I was eager to leave him. The quiet atmosphere seemed to stifle me. I longed for my lawless freedom and brilliant debates—the society of my so-called friends.

'I had one friend in particular, Stewart Morton. He was a man of some consideration; his family was old and wealthy, but his father and brother were well known for their freethinking opinions. Stewart had already made his mark at Oxford. He had undeniable abilities, he was clever and witty, and his brilliant conversation and attractive person blinded people to his faults; but, as a man, he was wholly without principle. I was in the habit of taking long walks with him, partly for exercise, and partly to carry on those discussions in which we both delighted. His dangerous sophistries were rapidly undermining my moral nature.

'After a time his stronger intellect dominated me. But for Stewart Morton I should never have met my fate. One afternoon, or really early evening, we found ourselves in a village

some miles away from our college. We were tired and hungry and thirsty, and even Stewart's brisk tongue had flagged a little. We were sauntering down a field where some haymakers were at work. One of these, a girl, attracted our attention. She was moving slowly between the cocks, raking up the loose hay. She wore a blue cambric dress and a white sun-bonnet. There was something regal in her gait; she looked like a princess who was playing at being a rustic. As we passed her, she leant on her rake and looked at us.

'"By the powers, what a beautiful girl!" observed Stewart in my ear. "What a subject for an idyl! by Jove! yes, and I will speak to her;" and, prompted by mischief, Stewart put his words into practice.

'Taking off his hat with his finest air, he informed the girl that we had lost our way, and were weary and starving. Was there a farmhouse near where we could obtain refreshment? And then he added, with glib falsehood, that his friend, pointing to me, was just recovering from an illness, and that he feared the effect of the long walk before us in our present fasting condition. I saw the girl look at me. She had large soft eyes, like a gazelle, with a sort of appealing sadness in them.

'"There is Mr. White's house," she returned—

"the red-brick house you see yonder; they are very kind, hospitable people. I am staying with them. I do not think they would refuse a glass of milk to a stranger; shall I go and ask them?" with another shy glance at me.

'"May we go with you?" suggested the young hypocrite; "you can walk as far as the house, Fleming, can you not?"

'"Oh yes!" I returned rather sulkily, for his little fiction displeased me. There was no need to have invented that story of my illness; but Stewart was in one of his mischievous moods.

'"Your friend does not look delicate," observed the girl in some surprise. She spoke in a low, deep voice; the accent was not perfectly refined. As she spoke she took off her sun-bonnet and fanned herself with it, as she walked between us. She was wonderfully handsome. The shape of her head was beautiful, and there was something classical in the smooth dark hair, drawn off the white forehead and coiled in glossy plaits behind. Her figure was large, but finely moulded, and there was an air of gravity about her that added to my interest in her.

'"He is not naturally delicate," commenced Stewart provokingly; "but an illness always pulls down a fellow. You are pretty fit now, aren't you, Fleming—only in a starving condition?"

'What more he meant to add is buried in

oblivion, for at that moment a stout comely woman, with pink ribbons in her cap, came out of the farmhouse.

'"Whoever are you bringing along with you, Aline ?" she asked in a puzzled tone, shading her eyes from the sun; but before the girl could answer, Stewart, hat in hand, was beside her. I heard the explanation again—long walk; two undergraduates; one of them recovering from an illness; impossible to get him back without refreshment; he would not answer for the consequences.

'"Dear sakes! just hear him," she interposed in quite a flurry; "poor young gentleman! Isn't it lucky, Aline, I have just masked the tea? I am sure you are welcome, gentlemen, if you will honour us by sitting down with us. White!" bustling into the passage, "wherever is that man, I wonder? White, here's company; two of our Oxford gentlemen dead beat and fasting. Aline, get some more plates, and tell Jane to dish up that ham. You are kindly welcome, young gentlemen!"

'I do not know how Stewart felt, but I was tolerably ashamed of his wholesale fibs, as these kind, homely creatures dispensed their simple hospitality. Mr. White, whose florid face matched his wife's ruddiness, shook hands with us heartily.

'"It is not the first time that young puss, Aline, has brought in gentlemen," he said with a wheezy laugh and a knowing wink at the girl.

'I thought she looked distressed; she coloured and went out of the room without speaking. On her return she sat down opposite me and began to cut bread-and-butter. I could not take my eyes off her. It was not so much her singular beauty that charmed me as her gravity, her silence, and the strange pathos of those dark eyes. Once or twice as she looked at me a sort of shiver passed over me, a thrill of expectation that went through me. Now and then she offered me something; but I noticed she never spoke or looked at Stewart. He was chattering in his clever, heedless way for the benefit of his host and hostess. Now and then the farmer leant back in his elbow-chair with a loud guffaw that made the tears run down his cheeks; but Aline never smiled. When tea was over, I was standing by the window a moment, when Aline suddenly paused beside me.

'"Have you been ill?" she said, fixing her strange eyes on me.

'"No," I returned in a vexed voice; "it was only his nonsense. I have never been ill in my life."

'"I thought so, you looked so strong; then you do not tell stories like him?"

'I shook my head, and then added hastily:

'"He meant no harm, it was only his fun; he is really very nice when you know him."

'"Humph! I think I like you best," she replied, and an odd little smile played round her lips; and then she leant out of the window and picked some roses.'

'My poor boy, I can imagine the rest,' as he paused to take breath.

'Yes, it is easy to imagine it,' he returned hurriedly, 'if you had only seen Aline that evening; it was an idyl—it fascinated us both; that dark wainscoted parlour—the girl in her blue dress, offering us the roses. "Will you come again?" that was what she said to me as I went out dizzy and bewildered with the novelty of my sensations.

'"What a Ruth!" observed Stewart as we walked down the lane. "I wonder if there be a Boaz in the background—my lady Ruth favours you, Fleming. I heard that pretty whisper just now; I am half inclined to cut you out, only, you see, I am so uncommonly good-natured. Go in and win, my boy; it will be rare sport to watch you—haymaking and syllabubs; tea and ham in the parlour. I had no idea you were such a gay Lothario."

'It was profanation to hear him talk like this. Must there always be a Mephistopheles when Faust meets his Margaret? Those deep sad eyes haunted me; the touch of the cool, soft hand still lingered in mine. Hitherto I had been fancy free; for the first time I felt the tingling of a new passion in my veins. That night before I slept I determined to see her again, and without Stewart.

'From that day I took solitary walks, and they invariably ended at Cross Farm. I had always a kindly welcome from Mrs. White and her husband; I think they were proud of the handsome girl who was their guest, and a suitor or two were to be expected. They made no objection if I invited Aline to take a stroll with me in the fields to admire the sunset; sometimes she walked back through the lanes with me.

'Aline always blushed with pleasure when she saw me, but after the first few minutes she invariably relapsed into gravity: she spoke little except in answer to my questions; but her manner was full of intelligence, and she never repelled me by any vulgarity. She was not a gentlewoman by birth; that was evident to me at once. She told me frankly that her brother—her only remaining relative—had a small shop in Holloway.

'"George is very kind to me, but I find the

life dull," she said once. "I do not like serving in the shop—the people stare so; I tell George I want to be a governess, but he will not hear of it. He has sent me here that I may get rid of the idea, and also because he is angry with me;" and her eyes filled with tears.

'How I longed to kiss them away! But that evening she would not tell me the reason of her brother's anger. At times her sadness—her utter despondency—infected me; I felt as though I were under the influence of some power that I could not resist. There were times when I thought I was not in love—when I wanted to break away from her and be free; sometimes I would part with her almost coldly, but in a day or two the desire to see her again, to be near her, would be too strong for me.

'I knew nothing of her real character; she was reserved with me; she neither invited nor permitted any love-making on my part; she liked me, and frankly told me so, but there was no coquetting on her part.

'One day I had driven over to spend an hour with her, when I found her looking flushed and excited; I thought her manner strange.

'"George is a tyrant!" she said, as I asked anxiously what was the matter. "He insists on my marrying a man old enough to be my

father. He is a grocer, too, but in a large way. He says I have given my word to marry him."

'"Is that true, Aline?"

'"Yes, it is true," she replied, bursting into tears; "but I would rather die than marry him. Basil, if you care for me, why do you not save me from George? I cannot keep my word—I should murder Nathaniel or myself. Oh! you do not know, but it is almost driving me out of my mind! and, Basil, you know you care for me."

'"I love you, dear," I returned passionately, for she was clinging to me, and sobbing like a broken-hearted child, and her beautiful face was wet with tears. How could I know?—I was only one-and-twenty, and I was not one who knew the ways of women. If I had been a little older—— But there, let me hurry on. I have not been the only headstrong young fool who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.

'We settled it all before we parted. The long vacation was approaching, and, contrary to Mr. Fleming's wishes, I had accepted an invitation to stay with Stewart Morton; his people lived at Norwood. Aline was going back to Holloway. Nothing could be easier than to procure a license and marry her in the

old church in Holloway Road. Her brother was a Dissenter, and so was Nathaniel Jennings.

'We parted from each other very tenderly; I believed, that day at least, that I was ready to lay down my life for Aline Barton. I took Stewart Morton into my confidence; he seemed a little alarmed at the notion of a marriage.

'"It will hinder your prospects in life," he said; "is there no way out of this?"

'I almost quarrelled with him at last; he wanted to teach me a little bit of worldly philosophy. He did not believe in women; in his opinion, flirtation was a venial sin. If I had listened to him'—and here his face darkened—'but I could not unlearn the lessons of a life. I silenced him at last by telling him roughly that I chose to be a fool rather than a knave; no woman should ever rue the day she saw me; that I was madly in love with Aline, and that I meant to make her my wife.

'He was a little sulky at first; but finally promised to see me through it, as he called it, and I accompanied him to Norwood. I only saw Aline two or three times before we were married. We met on Sunday evenings in the old parish church, and had a stroll together afterwards. She was very quiet and subdued, and very grateful to me for the sacrifice I was

making, and each time I left her I was more in love than ever.

'Stewart did not see her until the day we were married, and then he vowed to me in the vestry that he had never seen a grander-looking bride; and certainly Aline looked her best that day. Her face was colourless, and as she stood at the altar, with downcast eyes and her deep lashes sweeping her cheeks, she was more like a lovely statue than a woman. Once only she raised her eyes to me with a frightened look; it was when I was promising to love and cherish her until death. I felt her hand tremble in mine then. I had taken lodgings at Highgate; through Stewart Morton's influence I had secured a mastership there. Aline was not quite penniless; she had two or three hundred pounds. It was not until the day after my marriage that I wrote to Mr. Fleming. It was rather an off-hand letter; I was too proud to show feeling. I had no reply from him; but one day, when I returned from my morning's work, I found him sitting with Aline.

'The sight of him took my breath away; for a minute I could not speak. He had been ill—he looked thin and worn; but he stretched out his hand to me with his old kind smile.

'"So you could not trust me, Basil?" he said,

as Aline put down her sewing and went quietly out of the room.

'I could make him no answer; for the first time the consciousness of my own base ingratitude to this generous benefactor filled me with shame and remorse. How had I repaid this dearest friend of mine for all his loving sacrifice? By disappointing all his hopes of me; by flinging up my prospects in life, and uniting myself to a woman whom a few short weeks of matrimony had convinced me could never be my equal or companion! I stood before him confused and guilty—a prodigal weary already of his husks, yet for whom there could be no consolation.

'"My poor boy! we must make the best of it," he said presently, when, crushed and humiliated by his goodness, my proud reserve gave way. "You must be loyal to your wife, Basil. Never let her think she is not your equal; if she love you, she will soon teach herself to become worthy of her husband."

'He stayed with us some time, and shared our mid-day meal with us. I remember how patiently and gently he tried to win Aline's confidence; but she was in one of her strange moods, and seemed to have taken a dislike to him. She had already developed a singular jealousy of my friends. When I re-

monstrated with her after he had left, she said sullenly :

' " George is every bit as good and forgiving as Mr. Fleming, but you never ask him to take a meal in the place. You hate to have anything to do with him, because he is not one of your fine gentlemen !"

' This had been our first matrimonial dispute. Mr. Barton had behaved to us with tolerable generosity. He had stormed a good deal at first, and had called Aline in my presence a sly, good-for-nothing girl ; but he had relented at the sight of her tears.

' " You have treated Jennings cruel," he went on ; " he is that cut up that he can't mind his business, and all along of an ungrateful girl who could not keep her word to him. You have behaved as I never thought a girl could have behaved ; but it is too late to cry over spilt milk now, and what is done can't be altered. You have made your bed, and must just lie in it. I wanted to tie you up to a safe man ; but you have chosen to fend for yourself."

' " But you will forgive me, George ?" sobbed Aline.

' I hated to see her demean herself to such a fellow ; why, he could not even speak his own language, and he was a little insignificant sandy-haired man. The very look of his glossy-

black clothes turned me sick; how could he be Aline's brother? But they were evidently fond of each other.

'"Come, come," clapping her roughly on the back, "don't spoil your eyes with crying; least said soonest mended. We must make the best of a bad job. Bring your husband to have pot-luck with me on Sunday, Allie; and we will have a crack together."

'Oh, how I grew to loathe that little parlour behind the shop, and those Sunday dinners! I put a stop to them at last. "If you choose to have George here, well and good," I said one day; "but I am not going to Holloway every Sunday; you may go by yourself;" and Aline sulked, and retaliated by turning a cold shoulder to my friends. Before long I went of my own accord to Holloway. I must tell my story in my own way. I hate this part of my life so much I can hardly bear to speak of it. It was a drenching November evening. I stalked into the shop, looking, I suppose, as cheerful as the Ghost in "Hamlet." George, who was adding up accounts in his little desk, turned pale when he saw me. "Come into the parlour," he said; "Smith will mind the shop." I followed him in—I was benumbed with wet and cold; and he drew up a chair to the fire. "Sit down and have a warm, Fleming," he said quite kindly, though

we were not the best of friends. "Susan will bring up the tea-things in a minute; but there is something you want to tell me first?"

'"Yes, George."

'He rubbed his hands nervously together; his lips twitched. "You aren't going to tell me that Allie has broken out again?" he said; "don't tell me that, for heaven's sake!"

'I turned and looked at him sternly; he must have seen the loathing in my face, for he put his hand on my shoulder.

'"Don't, old chap; keep it in! Allie is your wedded wife, you know. A man is bound to bear with his own flesh and blood."

'"If I had known it"—and here I turned on him so fiercely that he recoiled a step or two—"I would have died sooner than marry your sister."

'"Aye, aye! to be sure you would," he replied pityingly; "but Nat was not of your way of thinking; he was that fond of Allie that he would have taken her in spite of it. That was why I wanted him to have her, because he knew all about it. If you had come to me and said, 'Barton, I am in love with your sister,' I would have told you the truth, and there would have been an end of it, and Allie would have stopped with me or married Nat Jennings."

'"George, what am I to do? I shall go mad if this goes on; I have no control over Aline."

'"What are you to do? that beats me, old fellow;" and he sat down opposite to me and shook his head disconsolately. "She has been a handful to me, that poor girl has; but for all that, I never wanted to get rid of her. She is all I have belonging to me; for I never mean to have chick nor child of my own. Somehow I have always turned against thoughts of matrimony since my cousin Jenny died. Allie has been like my own child, somehow; for there is twelve years between us; and I couldn't blame her as I should have done, when I remembered mother."

'I looked at him aghast.

'"Do you mean——?"

'He nodded. "Yes, mother and father too; but mother was the worst; she died of it at last. I always thought father took to it just out of misery at her goings on. Jenny lived with us then, and folks thought we should have married each other, only she caught malignant small-pox nursing a little servant who was taken ill, and that carried her off."

'"George, how old was Aline when you first saw signs of this fearful habit?"

'"Well, it might have been a matter of two years or so now. I thought I should have

broken my heart that night when I found it out—such a bonnie lass as she was, and so good-humoured and kind when the madness was not on her. Look here, Fleming, I can't stand seeing her own husband turn against Allie. When she was at her worst, and had got to the drink, I was never hard to her. How could she help it, poor girl, when it was in her blood? It was just a madness, and she knew it herself.

'"'George,' she would say in one of her penitent moods, 'it comes over me just like madness. I seem to have no power to fight against it. Sometimes I pray about it, but it always masters me in the end. I hate myself for it; I want to be good, and to have people love me. Perhaps if I go away somewhere—— Why don't you lock me up, and save me in spite of myself?' Poor Allie! she would be good for a long time after one of these breaks-out—that is why I wanted Nat Jennings to be her husband, because he would have had more patience with her."'

CHAPTER VIII.

ALINE.

'Yet, if I seem to speak of grief,
'Tis scarce worth wonder. I have known
Large losses, dealt in moments brief,
Hide harvests ere their autumn strown.'
PHILIP STANHOPE HARTLEY.

'My career has been one of difficulties, and doubts, and errors.' '*Guy Mannering*.'

AT this point Basil's voice suddenly dropped, as though he were weary. He rose and began pacing up and down the narrow point, as though he could no longer control his restlessness. I watched him without speaking. How I longed to stretch out my hand to him, to bid him be comforted.

'Do not lose hope. You are one of us; you are no longer alone in your wretchedness—you have a mother.'

Oh, if I might only say that to him! But

he must tell me all first. My poor boy! So this was his deary fate—to be linked for life to this woman. What bitter news for Virginia! What perplexity for all of us! The moon was rising now, and the pale silvery beams began to play over the water; the air was soft and balmy, and the only sound that reached our ear was the faint ripple of the waves on the sand. Basil suddenly came up to me.

'Are you cold or tired?' he asked abruptly. 'Miss Leigh told me to take care of you. Would you like to go in now, and let me finish this miserable story to-morrow?'

'I could not sleep until I had heard all you have to tell me. Sit down, my—Mr. Fleming. Do you think my heart is not full of pity for all you have suffered? Do you think I do not understand?'

'It was my own fault,' he returned huskily. 'I deserved to be punished, but at times it has seemed to me as though the punishment were greater than the sin. I was so young, so horribly young and inexperienced, and—and I thought I loved her.'

'Did you not?'

'I do not know—perhaps; but my love, such as it was, died a natural death very soon after our marriage. Aline had not been my wife

three months before I discovered her fatal habit. I had thought her strange once or twice—a little excited in her manner; but that night—shall I ever forget it?'—with a shiver. 'I had been spending the evening with Stewart, and had come home late. As I walked up Highgate Hill in the starlight, I thought rather tenderly of my wife. I had not seen her since the morning, and she had seemed a little depressed then.

'"I do not like you to be out so much, Basil," she had said to me. "There are times when I am afraid of being left to myself. If I had said that to George, he would have given up any pleasure to stop with me."

'I disliked this allusion to her brother, and answered her rather coldly:

'"George Barton and I are very different men. I am sorry you feel dull, Aline, but I cannot break my engagement with Stewart."

'"That is what you always say," she returned rather sullenly. "You care for Mr. Morton more than you do for me; and yet I am your wedded wife. I am not clever and amusing like your other friends, and so you get tired of me."

'"I wish you would not talk such nonsense, you silly child!" I replied, trying to laugh off this.

'But Aline was not to be soothed. She did not return my kiss as usual, and though she followed me to the door she had no parting smile or word for me. I thought privately that she was in a bad humour. Her absurd jealousy of my Oxford friends already tried me a good deal.

'I always let myself in with a latch-key. It was long past midnight, and I was surprised to see a light burning in the parlour. How foolish of Aline to be sitting up for me! I thought; and yet the little attention pleased me. I went in with a smile on my lips. What a sight met my eyes! The fire was out, one guttering candle was on the table; the other had burnt itself out. Aline was lying half across the table, with her flushed face pillowed on her arms. Could she be asleep—ill? What did that strange spirituous smell mean?

'As I stood on the threshold unable to realize the true meaning of the case, she opened her eyes, and with a stupid, vacant stare came unsteadily across the floor to me. Good heavens! I believe that sight nearly drove me mad in my horror. I pushed her from me with a curse, and she fell heavily to the floor.'

'You hurt her, Basil!'

'Nothing hurt her that night. She only grovelled at my feet, and begged me not to be angry, but I was almost beside myself. I

dragged her up, and made her go up to her room, but I had to carry her at last. I saw her throw herself upon her bed, and locked her in, and went downstairs. I spent the remainder of the night walking up and down like a caged thing. How was I to bear my life beside her? Miss Sefton, I believe only one thing kept me from blowing out my brains in the cold gray morning, and that was the thought of my adopted father. How could I bring this grief on him? No, I deserved punishment. I must bear the hideous fate I had brought on myself. I must bear with the woman I had made my wife. Yes, it was the thought of that true gentleman, Robert Fleming—his tender love, his stainless life—that shielded me in that awful hour, and brought me to my knees sobbing like a child.

'I left the house the next morning without seeing Aline. I had my school duties to perform. When our little maid brought in my breakfast, I told her to look after her mistress. "I am afraid she is ill," I stammered.

'When the time for my return approached, a feeling of disgust and sickness oppressed me. As I drew near the house my pace slackened. How was I to confront Aline? She did not come to meet me as usual. I had not expected it. The little parlour was in its usual order.

The fire burnt brightly. A shaded lamp was on the table. The kettle was hissing and bubbling on its brass trivet. The tea-things were arranged. A little bouquet of chrysanthemums and brown leaves lay beside my plate. An appetising smell of hot cakes came from the kitchen. For one moment I felt as though the hideous spectacle of last night were a dream. Then Aline entered.

'She came up slowly to the table, and stood leaning on it with one hand. She looked very white and ill, and her eyes were swollen with weeping.

'"Basil——" she began, and then stopped as though afraid to say more.

'"What have you to say to me?" I asked sternly; for even her grief-stricken aspect did not soften me in the least.

'"I have to ask your pardon," and then, bursting into wild weeping, she sank on the floor before me. "Oh, Basil, Basil, don't be so hard with me! I have tried; indeed, I have tried; but the temptation was too strong, and you left me alone. Oh, I would rather you killed me than look at me like that, as though you loathed the sight of me! It is not my fault—ask George. George knows, and he is always so good to me. Oh, why did I ever leave him?—why did you make me care for

you? I ought not to have let you marry me, but I was so afraid that George would force me to have Nat Jennings."

'"Aline, will you get up and listen to me?"

'"No, not until you say you will forgive me. Basil, you are my husband. You must help me to overcome this dreadful habit. I am young—I must get over it. I will—I must. I hate myself for doing it, but now and then the devil tempts me. Basil dear, only forgive me this once, and I will never offend you again."

'What could I do? She was my wife, and she looked so lovely, kneeling there with the tears rolling down her face. How could I help at last taking her in my arms? She was so very gentle and humble that night. She listened to me as meekly as a child while I talked to her. I told her that, of all sins, this was the most repellant to me—the one I judged most harshly.

'"Other vices are bad enough," I said; "but this degrades the whole moral sense. It drags a man down below the level of a beast. Aline, you have inflicted a fatal stab to my love. I can never think of you as I did yesterday. If this went on, I could not answer for the consequences."

'"Would you grow to hate me?" she whispered, and a great sadness, almost a despairing look, came into her beautiful eyes, and then she

covered my hands with kisses. "Oh, Basil, do not hate me! I love you so much, and I want to please you."

'"Then you must promise me never to taste the accursed stuff again. Promise me now, Aline."

'She gave me the promise gladly, and seemed as happy as a child when I kissed her; nothing could exceed her sweetness that night. She hung about me, and coaxed me all the evening. George came to see us the next day, and on the following Mr. Fleming surprised us by a second visit. I said nothing to either of them. Aline was on her best behaviour. She was gracious—charming. She sent George away perfectly satisfied. Stewart called in the next week, and she made much of him, and asked him to come again. When he left, and I was chatting with him on the doorstep, he said to me:

'"I begin to think you are a lucky fellow, Fleming! That wife of yours grows handsomer every time I see her."

'A month or two passed in tolerable tranquillity. I never left Aline now. I spent the evenings reading to her. On half-holidays, when I was free, I took her for a walk. I had reason to be more than usually considerate; we hoped in the early summer that Aline would

become a mother. Her health was a little delicate just now; she was liable to fits of depression, and I did not find it always easy to cheer her. Once or twice, as the winter went on, I had a vague suspicion that things were not quite right; but I was not sure. One night I was detained at school, helping the head-master with some accounts. I had begged Aline to go to bed early, and she had promised to do so. The house was quite dark, as I let myself in, and I went softly upstairs. As I entered our room, my heart died within me. Aline was stretched on the bed fully dressed. There was no need to ask this time if she were ill. I did not disturb her; cold as a stone, and with a sense of despair that seemed to crush the youth out of me, I went downstairs, and, rekindling the smouldering embers, threw myself down on the hearthrug, and lay until morning.

'The next evening there were tears and reproaches again. Aline was so ill with her penitence that I grew frightened at last. I must be more careful with her; but I was losing heart now. On the third relapse, I went to George; I have told you how he comforted me.

'The summer came, and Reggie was born; and for a few months love for her child, and

gratitude for my attentions, kept Aline straight; but by-and-by the old madness broke out again. Alas! I knew now that it was madness—an hereditary taint was in her blood. We tried every means, George and I; we watched her, kept her amused, and for two or three months no one could be more reasonable. Then I would leave her some morning standing smiling at the door, with her boy in her arms, looking like the picture of some grand, pale Madonna, and in the evening she would meet me with the raised look of a sleep-walker in her eyes.

'How she ever obtained the drugs that were destroying her we never knew; but stories of the lady at Myrtle Cottage begun to be rife in the neighbourhood. When things got worse, I was obliged to resign my post; the place had grown too hot for us.'

'But surely you let Mr. Fleming know of your trouble?'

He shook his head.

'No, I never could bring myself to tell him; and after a time he discontinued his visits. Aline had taken a strong dislike to him—she was always susceptible to these strange jealousies. At last I begged him not to come.

'"We are better apart just now," I said; "it is not pleasant for me to see my friends ignored by my wife, and I cannot bear to see you

treated as Aline treats you ;" and he acquiesced sorrowfully.

'I was glad when he kept away ; I could not bear that he should see my degradation. He used to send me money sometimes, but I always returned it. I would write to him now and then, and tell him about Reggie — his beauty, his cleverness, his winning little ways; but I said little about my wife. After a time my letters grew fewer. I told him that for the present we were living with Mr. Barton ; but I gave him no reason for the change. He wrote back and implored me to tell him more— to come and see him—to let him assist me ; but my answer was curt, and I fear ungracious, and after that he let me alone.

'Since I have been at St. Croix, I have written and told him everything. When I go back to England I mean to take Reggie to see him.'

'That is right,' I murmured.

'Yes, better late than never ; poor old man ! he is terribly cut up about it all.

'Well, it was after our baby-girl died that George made us come and live with him. I could not get another mastership, and was only earning a scanty maintenance by writing articles and reviewing books. Aline's few hundred pounds had long gone. George represented to

us that he was not a rich man ; the shop at Holloway was all he had.

'"Allie is the only creature I have belonging to me in the world," he said ; "and I can't see her pinched while I am alive. If you can put up with a humble place, Fleming, you are welcome to what I have. Allie and the boy will be safe with me ; and you will have a roof to call your own while you are looking out for work."

'Things were at such a low ebb with us just then that I could not well refuse George. My affection for Aline was a thing of the past now, and all my love was centred upon Reggie. From babyhood he had been constantly with me ; even before he could speak he would hold out his arms, and cry to come to me. He soon made it evident that he preferred my society to his mother's. Sometimes I had to take him out of his crib, and, wrapping him up in an old shawl, carry him downstairs. Nothing else would satisfy him, and he would lie contentedly in my arms while I read or wrote until he fell asleep. I never could quite understand Aline's feelings with regard to the child. Sometimes she appeared indifferent to him. Now and then in her irritable moods she seemed as though she could not endure the sight of him. I believe that after a time she grew jealous

of my fondness for him, and never willingly caressed him in my presence; but more than once, when she thought herself alone, I have seen her snatch him up, and cover him with kisses, while he struggled to get away from her.

'"Mother kisses Reggie too hard," I heard him say once.

'We had a very good nurse for him for two years. George's thoughtfulness provided this comfort, for Aline could not be safely trusted with the care of her child. Reggie was always happy with her, and until she died——'

I interrupted him.

'Wait one minute, please; I want to ask you a question. Did Reggie call her mammy?'

'Yes; how did you know that?' he returned in surprise. 'Reggie was very fond of her. I think he cared for her far more than for his own mother, and it was a great loss to us when she died, and George told us that he could not afford another nurse. I was never happy then if Reggie were out of my sight.

'It cost me a bitter struggle before I could make up my mind to go and live at Holloway; but I could not let Aline and Reggie starve. The thought of the little parlour behind the shop gave me a sick feeling. There was a room upstairs with two windows looking down

on Holloway Road, which was given up to Aline; but all the meals were taken in the parlour. Rebecca, the elderly maid-of-all-work, who had lived with George for the last fifteen years—a red-haired, large-boned woman—would lay the table in her usual noisy fashion: the willow-pattern plates, the big clumsy knives, were repugnant to me. Rebecca's turned-up sleeves, her dirty apron, her rough, uncouth ways, were all separate sources of offence; but I learnt to be grateful even to Rebecca, when I saw how wisely and kindly she dealt with Aline in her attacks. She had a man's strength, and would carry her in her arms like a child.

'"You may leave her to Becky," George would say; "Becky understands Allie perfectly."

'My surroundings were intolerable to me. I had been used to Mr. Fleming's refined and cultured conversation, and my year at Exeter had still more unfitted me for the society of a man like George Barton. After a time I could not endure my life, and I was obliged at last to find a retreat where I could read and write quietly without distraction.

'In my walks about Highgate I had discovered a little cottage where a worthy old couple lived, with whom Reggie and I made friends. In return for a trifling weekly sum they agreed to

allow me the use of an empty room. I sent in a few articles of furniture, laid up a little store of wood and coal in an outhouse, and every morning, as soon as George and I had finished our early breakfast—Aline never appeared until long afterwards—I dressed Reggie, and we set off for Laurel Cottage. We spent the whole day there. On my way I purchased provisions for our mid-day meal; sometimes ready-dressed from a cook's shop, or else I broiled our chops or steak on an old gridiron Mrs. Jones lent us.

'Reggie played about happily while I wrote my articles and reviews. When he was tired he would clamber up on my knee and sit quietly, turning over his picture-book. He quite understood that I must not be disturbed. Sometimes his head would drop against my shoulder and his eyes close. I would let him stay until my arm got cramped, and then lay him down on a rug at my feet, where he would sleep for an hour or two. He never gave me any trouble, but always seemed perfectly happy and contented. A few bricks, a Noah's ark, and a little cart were his only playthings; but when it was warm enough he would be running about the little garden half the day, building a grotto with some oyster-shells, or digging beside old Jones, and making belief to help him. Dear

little chap, he was just the sunshine of my life! I do think Aline was right when she said once that he was more my child than hers.

'Sometimes when I played with him, or hunted butterflies, or picked flowers in the lanes, I forgot all about Holloway; but it was always the worst hour in the twenty-four when I went back to it. When the evenings were cold I wrapped Reggie in an old rug and carried him all the way home. He used to burrow in it like a rabbit, and I could just see his bright eyes peeping out of the folds. He never came to any harm; I think the free life suited him as well as it did me.

'George would look up and nod a welcome to us as we passed through the shop; but Aline generally received us rather sulkily:

'"So you have come back," she would say; "I suppose Reggie wants his tea;" but she never seemed to take any pleasure in waiting on him. Oftener than not, Rebecca would put him to bed. Aline was not always disposed to leave the warm parlour and the fireside. "George would be coming in for his tea," she would observe, and he liked to see her there. It was always George—never me or the boy. I used to think at last she did not care for either of us, and yet she was the mother of my Reggie!

'I could not spend the evening, with George

coming in and out, talking to Aline as she sat at her work; the tingling of the shop-bell and the footsteps of the customers irritated me too much. Besides, Aline and I had little to say to each other. I used to wait until Reggie was in bed, and go up and say good-night to him, and then go out and prowl about the streets for hours. It was strange, lonely work, but I liked it somehow. I saw plenty of life, only it was of the humbler sort. Sometimes, when the mood was on me, I would walk into London. I never returned until late. Aline was always in bed, but George would be sitting by the fire smoking and reading his newspaper. The remains of the frugal supper would be still on the table.

'"Help yourself, old fellow," he would say. "Allie has gone to bed, and I am just finishing my last pipe. Becky has gone up, too, but I will go down to the cellar and draw you another mug of ale, if you want it."

'Poor old George! he was always the same—good-humoured and cheery, and ready at any moment for a "jaw," as he called it, but I would not often be drawn into an argument. He was, like all Dissenters of his class and standing, narrow-minded and intolerant and full of prejudices. I used to compare him sometimes in my own mind to Mr. Fleming,

or even to Stewart Morton, and wondered what Stewart would have said to him.

'I am afraid I treated him very badly, but he bore all my snubs with the same cheery good-humour. I think his one fear was that I should break away from Aline altogether. He had a sort of pride in his own way, and as long as he could keep the peace between us, and things were outwardly smooth, he seemed satisfied. I am sure in his own heart he was sorry for me. He never objected to my long absences, and always explained them in his own fashion. I heard him talking once to his friend Jennings. I suppose the latter had been somewhat inquisitive.

'"No, he doesn't work here. You see, with the customers coming and going, there is no sort of quiet. He has a room a little way out where he writes; it is like a gent going to his office."

'"But he is out all the evening, too. I wonder Allie likes it!" replied Jennings, who still took an interest in his former sweetheart.

'I could have flung him out of the shop as I heard him, but George did not seem the least embarrassed by this cross-examination.

'"Well, you see, Nat, Allie is a sensible lass, for all her failings, as is known between you and me. She knows the lad is a good bit tried with

her goings on, and wants exercise after his writing. He is a rare walker, is Fleming."

'"Humph!" was all Jennings' reply.

'I wonder if George's explanation satisfied him; no doubt he thought I neglected Aline shamefully. I was in a bad temper that evening, and when George came into the parlour I said a contemptuous word about Jennings.

'"It strikes me as rather bad taste that he should always be coming round after what has passed between him and Aline," I said; for a man is always touchy about his wife, and though I did not love Aline, I would not allow any old sweethearts to come after her.

'To my surprise, George quite brightened up at my brusque speech.

'"I don't mind your saying that a bit, Fleming," he returned; "it shows you have some sort of feeling for poor Allie. Bless your heart! Allie is barely civil to him; she never holds her head higher than when Nat is here, so there is no call for you to be jealous. With all her faults, she knows her duty too well for that."

'"Oh, don't trouble yourself," I answered coldly. "I am not the least jealous of Nat Jennings or of any other man."

'"Of course not," he replied briskly. "You are quite right there, my lad, for Aline never

looked at any man but you—not in the way of loving him, I mean. As for Nat—poor old beggar!—I am precious sorry for him; he can't get over the loss of Allie. But there, it was not to be, and Allie is safe with me;" and with a sigh he went off to shut up the shop.

'Now—would you believe it?—I was such a fool that I must needs go upstairs and hector Aline on the subject.

'"Nat Jennings comes here too often," I said to her. "I have just told George so. I hate a fellow to come sneaking round where he is not wanted."

'"There is no reason for calling him names, or speaking to George, either; and you will wake Reggie if you talk so loud," was her only reply, and I dropped my voice at once.

'"All the same, Aline, I tell you I will not have the fellow round here so often."

'"You must tell George that," she returned, with a dignity that somehow became her. "It is not my affair, nor yours either—Nat is his friend."

'"But he used to be yours," I retorted sulkily; "what is the use of denying it?"

'Aline flushed. "What has come over you to-night, Basil? What does it matter to you if anyone looks at me or not? I thought that sort of thing did not interest you much now.

It is quite true I took up with Nat once to please George; but I never could fancy him, as I told you. It is not likely I should trouble my head about him now, when I have married another man."

'But I was not quite mollified. "That is all very well as far as it goes; but you see, Aline, he may trouble his head about you, and I could not put up with that for a moment."

'She looked at me rather oddly, and the old wistful, tender look came into her eyes. "Thank you, Basil, for caring about it so; but there is no need;" and she turned away. I was half tempted to follow her and give her a kiss, for she had answered me gently, and looked like the old Aline; but she left the room. I think things might have been a little better after that, only a few days afterwards Aline had one of her breaks-out, and then everything was wrong again.

'My literary work had brought me in a little money, and this summer I determined to give myself a holiday. I told Aline that I was going to take Reggie abroad. As usual, she made no objection, and though George looked grave and shook his head at the notion, I refused to listen to him for a moment. "I must have thorough change of scene," I observed irritably; "for the last month or two I have felt nearly mad. Aline will be quite happy with you; she

will not miss the boy, and I must take him. I could not go without Reggie."

'"It is not my place to find fault with you, lad," he answered sadly. "Yes, you may leave Allie with me; but you are wrong about her not missing the child."

'"Why, do you mean she really cares so much for Reggie?"

'"Well, she is the little chap's mother, isn't she?" with a rough sort of pathos. "I tell you what, Fleming: you don't understand Allie as well as I do; she isn't without her conscience; she knows what a burthen she is to you, and she tries to make up to you by sparing Reggie. Why, when you are gone she will just cry her eyes out, and then fly to the drugs for comfort; that is what she always does when she is unhappy. I see you don't believe me, lad; but it is my opinion, and Becky's too, that she is as fond of you both as possible. I have seen her watching you when you and the little chap were hugging each other, with her eyes quite full of tears;" but I would not believe him. Aline showed no special feeling when we took leave of her. Her eyes were quite dry when she packed Reggie's things, and when I put him in her arms, and he kissed and stroked her face in his pretty way, she gave him back to me as quietly as possible.

'There! I have told you all. I have kept nothing back, Miss Sefton. I am only six-and-twenty, and yet my fate has been such that I have grown weary of my life. O God! when I think of what I might have been, and what I am——' and with a groan he was about to spring to his feet; but I laid my hand on his arm.

'Basil,' I said, 'do not go yet; it is my turn now.'

CHAPTER IX.

'YOU ARE BASIL LYNDHURST!'

'Let us not burden our remembrances
With a heaviness that's gone.'
'*Tempest.*'

'Courage and comfort! All shall yet go well.'
'*King John.*'

I HAD spoken in a somewhat agitated tone, and Basil seemed perplexed at my manner. 'Miss Leigh is right,' he said anxiously; 'and you are very tired. I can feel that you are trembling all over. Why did you let me talk so long? it must be nearly nine o'clock. Look how bright the moonlight is! indeed I cannot allow you to sit any longer.'

He spoke with such gentle insistence that I could not refuse to rise; but I still detained him.

'I cannot go back yet. Olga will be there, and I must speak to you alone. If I am tired I do not know it; I am thinking of other things.

I have heard it all now. My poor boy, how you have suffered! And then your wife! It is all so sad—and to know it is for life.'

'Yes, it is for life,' he answered gloomily.

'Oh, my dear, do not speak in that tone! You have great troubles; but there may be consolations.'

'You are very good to try and comfort me,' he replied quietly. 'It is your kind heart and your sympathy that prompt you to speak of comfort; but while Aline lives——' He stopped abruptly.

'Do not let us speak of her—not just yet—you have your cross; but there may be blessings in store for you. Basil, I want to tell you something, only I am afraid of startling you. What if I have found out something about your past life that you do not know yourself—about your father and——'

'My father!' he exclaimed before I could finish my sentence—'my father, who cared so little about me that he gave me up to a stranger!' And then he added bitterly: 'Mr. Fleming is the only father I ever knew.'

My heart sank when I heard him speak in that tone; his mother had forsaken him too! I trembled as I thought of Virginia. For a moment I hardly knew what to say, and all the time he was looking at me so keenly.

'Do you mean that you knew my father?' he asked presently.

'Yes, I knew him. He made the life of one very dear to me so wretched that death would have been a relief; but he is dead now. We must not judge those who are gone. But for your broken-hearted mother——'

'She is dead too,' he returned quickly; 'she died when I was a baby. Mr. Fleming told me so.'

Someone had lied to him, then.

'Basil, your mother is not dead! All these years she has been seeking her son!'

In the clear, white light I saw his face change; he started violently.

'I do not understand you. Why do you say such strange things to me? My mother! —I have no mother! You are making some mistake.'

'I am making no mistake,' I repeated calmly. 'All these weeks you have interested me; but to-day I have found out the reason. To-morrow you must come with me to the cemetery at St. Croix, and we will stand together at your father's grave, and I will tell you then about your mother.'

'You must tell me now,' he returned, and his tone betrayed strong emotion. 'You have said too much and too little. If you knew my

parents—and something in your manner assures me that you are speaking the truth—you must know their name and mine. Who am I, then?'

I took his hands, and held them as I answered him.

'You are Basil Lyndhurst!' I said. 'You are the son of my only sister, the grandson and heir of my father, Ralph Sefton!'

He clutched my hands so tightly that I winced with the pain. 'Good God!' was all he could say for the moment. I could see it was impossible for him to realize it.

'You are my nephew, Basil.'

'Am I?' and then he drew his hands away, and walked to the end of the point.

I think his emotion was so great that he could not speak to me. He stood quite still and motionless for a few minutes, with his arms folded across his chest and his head bent. Then he came back to me, and, even in that light, I could see the excited look in his eyes.

'I want the proofs; you must tell me all—everything! There must be nothing kept back from me, not one word, if this be true!' and his chest heaved; it was difficult for him to restrain himself to speak calmly.

'It is true; but I cannot tell you all to-night. I am growing weary—I must confess it now—the strain has been too great. Basil, it is a

great thing that I have told you. I do not think you have realized it—that you are your grandfather's heir, and the master of Brookfield Hall.'

'You said something like that before,' he returned uneasily. 'No, I do not realize it; I feel as though I were dreaming, Miss Sefton.'

'You must call me Aunt Catherine. Basil, my dear, you are one of us—you are my boy now.'

Then he broke down utterly.

'Oh,' he said, when he had recovered himself a little, and we were walking slowly up the common, 'it is the thought that I have someone belonging to me that unmans me so. To think that it is you—you who have saved my boy's life—who now claim me as a nephew; that I have a mother who has been thinking of me all these years—it is too much! too much!'

'And your home, Basil—the beautiful home you have never seen?'

'I cannot take it in to-night,' he returned in a bewildered tone. 'It is your house, is it not, Aunt Catherine?'

He hesitated shyly over the last words; but I felt such a thrill of pride as I heard him say it.

'No; it is yours,' I answered quietly; 'but your grandfather stipulated that it should be

your mother's home for life, and mine, if we wished it. But it is a great house, Basil! There is one wing that has always gone by the name of the Dower House.'

'What do you mean?' he returned quickly. 'Is it possible that you think?—but I will not discuss that to-night. Why do you hint at such things when my brain is almost reeling? You do not know what it is to me to feel that there is such a home for Reggie in the future; that the shop at Holloway will be a nightmare of the past! Do you mean'—and here his voice shook again—'that that is all over for ever, and that I am not to go home night after night to see George smoking in his shirt-sleeves? Oh, good heavens! when I think of my life there! And you talk to me as though I were going to turn you out of your home; and I am to believe you, and not think it is all a dream!'

He was so agitated that I had some trouble to quiet him. He complained at last that I told him so little about his mother. I had some difficulty in evading his questions.

'It is so late, and I am tired out, Basil. To-morrow we will have a long talk. If I began about Virginia, I should not end until midnight; but I will tell you as much as this—she is a great invalid. All her youth and strength has been crushed out of her; her life has been

an unhappy one; her troubles have affected her nerves; she is old and weak, and needs a son's tenderness.'

'She shall have it,' he answered; and I could see his eyes were glistening, and then neither of us said more until we reached La Maisonnette.

He seemed as though he meant to leave me —perhaps he thought I was too weary; but I drew him in.

'I cannot part with you just yet, and you have not tasted food for hours, and Olga will be waiting to congratulate you.'

But he did not require pressing.

'I wanted to come in,' he said simply. 'I felt as though I must see Reggie. Ah! there is Miss Leigh; she has been watching for us.'

Olga was standing outside the glass door of the salle-à-manger. She looked at us anxiously as we entered.

'Well, Aunt Catherine?' was all she said.

I was about to answer to explain, when Basil put me aside quite unceremoniously.

'Miss Leigh,' he said eagerly, 'she is my Aunt Catherine now.'

'Yes, I know;' and Olga held out her hand to him with one of her sweetest smiles. 'You are Basil—the long-lost Basil; for whom they

have been seeking all these years. Oh, I am so glad. And you and Reggie—dear little Reggie!—will come to live at the Hall.'

I think those few simple words, said so cordially, did more to convince Basil of the truth than all my explanations. The bewildered look left his face; he grew calmer. As he grasped her hand, he said quickly:

'You live at Brookfield, too?'

'Yes; I am so glad. And you will know Jem, and Hubert, and Kitty; and the children will play with Reggie. Fancy Reggie and Girlie-ga together, Aunt Catherine! Oh, it is too delightful!'

I wondered what made Basil turn his back suddenly and walk to the window. A minute afterwards he said he would go up to Reggie. Olga came and knelt down beside me directly we were left alone.

'Are you very glad, dear Aunt Catherine?' she asked gently. I think my answer must have satisfied her. 'And Basil—I suppose I must call him Mr. Lyndhurst now—he looks very pale.'

'It is with happiness. Oh, what a life he has had, poor boy! Olga, I must tell you all about it some day. His wife——'

'What of his wife?' she asked quickly.

'That is what I cannot tell you now. But

she is unworthy of him; and she makes him very unhappy.'

'There is all the more need for his mother to comfort him. I always knew he was unhappy—that is why I was so sorry for him. And he is poor, too; and I suppose his home is uncongenial to him. Poor Mr. Lyndhurst! But he will have you, Aunt Catherine. Oh, how proud he looked when he called you that!'

We talked a little more, for it was some time before Basil returned, and then we sat down to supper. I think Olga was the only one who spoke much. She was gay, vivacious, charming; our silence did not subdue her in the least. She insisted on giving Basil a full description of the Hall. I am sure she did it on purpose, because she saw how strongly he was moved. She talked about the Lady's Walk, and related the Lady Gwendoline's story. She even mentioned the peacocks, which she said would be such a delight to Reggie.

'Reggie will have the old nursery, will he not, Aunt Catherine?' she said presently. 'It is papered so prettily, and has such a lovely view.'

Once she called him Mr. Lyndhurst, and I saw Basil start and flush.

'I do not know my new name yet,' he said,

trying to laugh. 'I think I prefer Basil at present.'

'Mr. Basil, then,' she said, smiling at him. 'Your grandfather's name was Ralph; but he was not a bit like Ralph of the Iron-hand. Aunt Catherine, you ought to have been called Gwendoline; but, indeed, it would have suited Mrs. Lyndhurst best.'

'Do you mean my mother?' he asked, in a low voice.

'Yes, but her name is Virginia. How strange that her husband was Paul!' and so she talked on.

Basil seemed to listen in a sort of trance. Now and then he put in a word, a suggestion, a question. As for me, I could not eat; I sat with my hands on my lap, thinking of Virginia and looking at her boy and mine. It was late before Basil went away; I wanted him to stay, but he said for this one night he would rather go back to the pavilion. He was too restless to sleep; he wanted to prowl about, to smoke in the moonlight. No house could hold him in such a mood, so I was obliged to let him go.

'But I may come in to breakfast, may I not?' he said, as he bade me good-night; 'and afterwards we will have that talk;' and then Olga and I stood at the door and watched him striding down the path to the little gate.

'Aunt Catherine, what will Jem say?' was Olga's last question that night.

I was worn out, but I could not sleep until daylight; the thought of the letter I had to write to Virginia, and of my impending talk with Basil, drove all drowsiness from my eyes. How was I to make him understand Virginia's timid and morbid nature? Would he believe in the mother who, in her nervous panic, had abandoned her child? I felt I had not yet surmounted all my difficulties; another thought kept me restless. Would it not be necessary to see Robert Fleming? Did we not owe him a full explanation? Besides which, a verification of facts on his side would be satisfactory to us both. He must know the whole truth about his adopted son; he must receive our thanks for those years of care and tenderness. And as I remembered them, I felt that Basil, as the adopted son of Robert Fleming, was dearer to me than ever.

Yes, it was this last thought—why should I deny it?—that kept me wakeful. One day before long Robert Fleming and I would meet again—once more in this life, thank God! I should look in his true face again; we who had once been lovers would grasp hands as friends. I dismissed these agitating reflections at last, and again the thought of Basil's dark face glowing

with happiness stole across my mind—my boy as well as Virginia's! Our lonely days were over now. It was no stranger whom I should present to her, but one whom I already loved, whom I was beginning to understand. 'He is already one of us,' I said to myself, as the happy tears came to my eyes in the darkness; and as I remembered Reggie, my cup seemed full to overflowing.

I dressed myself early the next morning, and waited for Basil; I was impatient to see him again. When I heard the click of the little gate I went out in the sunshine to meet him. I had expected a joyous greeting. To my surprise, his face had the same white shaken look it had worn when I first spoke to him; there was a haggardness about him, as though he had not slept. As I took his hand, it felt weak and nerveless as a little child's.

'Basil, my dear boy, are you ill?'

'No,' he returned in a low, vehement voice that increased my apprehension; 'but I have been thinking about it all night, and I am convinced it must be a mistake. You have told me nothing—there has been no proof, no certainty; it is this that tortures me—that I cannot bear. If it should be all a mistake!'

'It is no mistake, Basil, I am sure—quite sure—or I would not have told you. In an

hour or two you shall hear everything. Will you not trust me until then?'

My quiet voice seemed to soothe him; he spoke more calmly.

'I thought the night would never end. I felt as though I could not wait until morning. If it should not be true, and I must go back to that life, how could I endure it? Would not everything be worse—more unbearable? In the moonlight I was picturing it all as Miss Leigh described it. I seemed to see it in a dream—the old Hall, the Ghost Walk, the avenue, and the rooks cawing overhead. I could fancy Reggie running over the lawns—just fancy the little chap I carried in my old rug down Highgate Hill!—and then I thought of my mother—and if it should not be true!' and he set his teeth hard.

'Basil,' I said gently, 'it is true. You are distressing yourself to no purpose; it is just a nervous fancy because you have not slept. I want you to do something for me—I want you to come in now and take your breakfast quietly. I do not wish Olga to see the state you are in; it would trouble her so much. I have ordered Jules to be round at ten o'clock, and we will drive down to the cemetery; and when we have found your father's grave I will tell you all I know.'

I am sure my calmness gave him courage, for he made a strong effort to carry out my wishes; and though he could not eat, and spoke very little, Olga did not seem to perceive there was anything amiss. It did us both good to see her sitting there and looking so cheerful and serene; a sort of halo of youth and purity seemed to surround her; her large, clear eyes were beaming with kindliness.

'Mr. Basil,' she said in her simple direct way, 'I am sure Reggie is almost well now; he has been laughing and talking this morning, and he wants to be dressed immediately and to go down to the bay; for he says all the little fishes miss him.'

We tried to laugh at this little speech, but in spite of all Olga's efforts the conversation flagged. I was glad when the meal was over, and Basil went up to his boy. He did not come down until the fiacre was at the gate. The drive was taken almost in silence, and it seemed long before we reached the cemetery.

Père Lefevre had given me implicit directions. Before many minutes had passed I conducted Basil to the spot. There was a little mound, with a black wooden cross at the head; some kind soul had hung a wreath of yellow immortelles on it. There was the name 'Paul Lyndhurst,' and 'R.I.P.'—that was all. Basil

had become very quiet; he took my hand and led me to a little bench placed in a shady corner; no one was in the cemetery; we had it to ourselves.

'Will you begin from the beginning?' he said gravely; and then, leaning his elbows on his knees, he composed himself to listen.

It was a long story, but I managed to tell him everything; he only interrupted me once.

'I will see Monsieur Lefevre myself—that will be best; the entry of my baptism must be found at St. Sulpice.'

This was all he said from the beginning to the end.

My voice faltered a little when I first spoke of Virginia, but I suppressed nothing: he was a full-grown man; he must know the whole truth. I disguised nothing—her panic, her wild flight, her anguished repentance. I tried to make him see it with my eyes; I drew a touching picture of her loneliness, her broken health, her wanderings in the Lady's Walk, her nightly prayers for her son.

'Basil, she lives for you,' I finished; 'she has no other thought in life. But for this hope of finding you her frail existence must have ended long ago; it is for you to make up to her for these years of unutterable sorrow.'

He did not seem as though he heard me;

his head was still buried in his hands; he did not move until my voice died away into silence —I had nothing more to say; then he started up and stretched his arms over his head.

'It is true, then? Oh, Aunt Catherine!' and then he took my hand and kissed it.

His face was very grave—almost stern; but I saw by his eyes that he doubted no longer.

'You acknowledge that you are Basil Lyndhurst, and the grandson of Ralph Sefton.'

'Yes; I am not such a fool as to disbelieve it any longer. I will see Monsieur Lefevre. Oh, if we could only find Lizette! and then I must write to Mr. Fleming. Aunt Catherine, he must be the first to hear—he comes before my mother.'

He spoke the last word in a hesitating way; his manner did not please me.

'Oh, Basil! not before your mother.'

'Yes,' he said, and a dark flush crossed his face—a flush of extreme pain; 'you must not think me hard if I say so; I have a strange nature; I shall find it difficult to forget what you have told me.' I was silent; how was I to answer him? The next minute I saw him look at me with great affection. 'Oh, if you were my mother!' he murmured, and his eyes were full of tears.

'Dear Basil, when you see her you will love her too.'

'I hope so,' but there was no conviction in his tone. 'Last night I was thinking of her—oh, so tenderly! I kept saying "mother" to myself, just to hear how it sounded; but the feeling has got chilled somehow.'

'It will pass; believe me, it will pass; your mother is a good woman.'

'She was very weak,' he replied gravely. 'Look here, Aunt Catherine, I have a little chap of my own; I can put myself in her place: could I ever have left Reggie?'

'You are a man—you have a man's strength; Virginia was a weak girl.'

'Miss Leigh is a girl, too. Do you think—— But what am I saying? There are not many like her.'

'Perhaps not; she is very good. But, Basil, she is fond of your mother.'

'Is she?' and his face lighted up. 'But, then, she likes everyone—that is just her goodness. Aunt Catherine, please do not look so sad; of course I mean to be good to my mother; do you think I shall reproach her? Only when I think of Reggie, and then of that poor little lonely chap in the garret, I somehow feel as though an impassable gulf separated me from my mother.'

His face had settled into sternness again; but how was I to reason with him?

'And there is Aline,' he continued after another silence; 'what will my mother say to her?'

'She will be sorry, of course; but she will receive her kindly and make the best of her.'

'I doubt if it will answer,' he returned gloomily; 'I cannot imagine Aline at the Hall. She will disturb your peace and my mother's; she is a strange being. She will not assimilate herself to your ways; perhaps if I go away——'

'Go away, and you are the master, Basil! Do you know it all belongs to you? All these years I have been nursing the estate, and saying to myself, "It is for Basil," and you would leave us to our loneliness!'

'I do not wish to leave you,' he replied tenderly; 'it is of you I am thinking, not myself. I cannot bear to think that my wife may bring trouble!'

'We cannot help all that,' I answered quickly; 'it is her right. We cannot rob her of her prerogative. Where you and the child are, Aline must be!'

'I suppose so,' he replied in a troubled tone; 'but she would be happier with George.'

'The house is large enough for all,' was my answer. 'Do you remember what I told you

last night, Basil? There is a wing that has always been used as a dower-house. There is plenty of room there for Virginia and me. We shall not be in Aline's way or yours.'

He made no reply; but after a minute he rose and began to pace the walks. Presently he came back to me, his eyes kindling, his head held high. I saw then, for the first time, a likeness to his mother when she was a girl.

'Basil,' I said eagerly, 'you have the Sefton mouth. You remind me of your mother and grandfather!'

He looked excessively pleased at that.

'I am trying to realize it all,' he said simply; 'yesterday I was no one; I did not even know my own name; I was indebted to charity for a roof; to-day'—here his eyes flashed; he looked wonderfully handsome—'to-day I am Basil Lyndhurst, master of Brookfield Hall; the descendant of a hundred brave ancestors—among them, Ralph of the Iron-hand; and the best of it all is,' his voice changing as he spoke, 'that it will all come to my little chap—to Reggie!'

CHAPTER X.

LIZETTE DUPONT.

'Let our old acquaintance be renewed.'
Second Part of 'Henry IV.'

'She's a good creature.'
'Merry Wives of Windsor.'

It was nearly one o'clock when we parted at the gate of the cemetery, for Basil had excused himself from accompanying me back to La Maisonnette. He would put me into a passing fiacre, he said; but there were many things that would detain him at St. Genette. It was absolutely necessary for him to seek an interview with Père Lefevre. He wished to see an entry of his baptism at St. Sulpice. Inquiries must also be set on foot for the relatives of Lizette Dupont; he must take counsel with Père Lefevre on the matter. All this was said in a quick, decisive voice. Basil was bringing his clear, masculine intellect to bear on the subject.

I felt he would lose no time and spare no pains in unravelling every possible clue. To my surprise, he begged me to defer my letter to Virginia until the next day.

'It will be a long letter; it will take you hours to write it,' he continued as I remonstrated with him. 'You are far too tired for such a task, and I am sure Miss Leigh will agree with me. You must go home and rest, that you may be ready to talk to me this evening;' but I objected to this on the score of selfishness.

'You selfish!' he returned in a tone of infinite scorn; but he relented at my pleading face. 'Well, if you must write, let it be a brief note of preparation; it will be better so. Say you have news—important news; that you know exactly where Basil is to be found; that he is well, and that you will write more fully by the next mail. Will you promise me to do this, Aunt Catherine?' and he would not let me leave him until I had promised.

How strange it was to submit to that strong young will! Since my father's death no one had contested mine, and yet it was sweet to me to give way. 'There is someone to take care of us now,' I thought, as I drove away and left him standing in the middle of the road. He had pulled off his gray cap, and the sunshine shone on his uncovered head. How strong he looked

—so full of life and energy, with such free grace and ease in every movement—a son of whom any mother could be proud! And as I thought of Virginia, I could not see him for the mist before my eyes.

The mid-day meal was over when I arrived. I had left orders that things should go on as usual; but Jeanne brought me a dainty little dinner, and waited on me. Olga was with Reggie in the little grove. I could see the red umbrella gleaming through the trees. As soon as I had refreshed myself, and written a few lines to Virginia, I joined them, after giving orders that our coffee should be served there. I was too much excited to sleep, and an easy-chair in the shade would be delicious. Reggie was lying in the hammock, and looked far more like his old self, in spite of the loss of his hair. I thought he was prettier than ever. His delicacy gave him an ethereal look, and his eyes were larger and brighter. He had his two kittens hugged tightly in his arms. I thought I never saw a sweeter picture.

Olga was reading. She put down her book to talk to me. I told her a little about our morning's conversation, but it was not possible to say much before Reggie, and after a time we changed the subject. Presently she leant towards me and whispered: 'Do you know,

Reggie has been talking about his mother to-day quite of his own accord. When I asked him if he wanted to go back to her, he shook his head most decidedly.

'"Reggie will stop here with father and my Dear," he said. "Mother is always too tired to put Reggie to bed, so Becky comes;" and then he went on about Uncle George, but I could not understand him in the least. "If Reggie goes home, my Dear must come too," he finished. Was it not pretty of him to say that?'

'Olga, I do believe you love that child more than you love Girlie-ga or Wilfred.'

'I cannot help it,' she returned quickly. 'Is it wrong, Aunt Catherine? one is not responsible for these things. I dare say Mr. Fleming felt the same for that little child he found in the garret. I think Reggie and I will always love each other, if it were only for the memory of the sweet days we have passed together.'

She spoke in a somewhat troubled tone. Olga certainly looked a little pale and subdued this afternoon; perhaps the heat oppressed her; she had lost her old vivacity; but the next minute she made an effort to recover herself.

'Oh, do you know there is something I have not told you? I had a letter from Jem this morning, such a long delightful letter, and he says that next week he will be coming home,

and he wants to know if there will be any chance of seeing me.'

'That depends on Basil. Reggie is well enough to travel now. Next week?—oh yes! Virginia will be expecting us before that.'

'Will it be so soon over—our happy visit?' And Olga looked wistful, almost sad. 'It will be like a dream when we look back on it—the bay, and the yellow sands, and Sefton Point, and this dear old house, and the pavilion. Shall you care to see Jem again, Aunt Catherine? But he is nothing now; it is only Mr. Basil.'

She spoke with the smile still on her lips. Olga had such a lovely smile, but only I who knew her could recognise the sadness underneath it.

'Yes, it is Basil who is our own boy; but you will still be a part of my life—you and Jem. Even Basil will not come between us. Surely you believe this, Olga?'

'Oh yes,' she returned, kissing me hastily. 'Dear Aunt Catherine, do you think I would have it otherwise? All these years you have been so patient and so lonely, and now you have Mr. Basil and Reggie; for Reggie is your own, too. How glad Jem will be! but you must expect him to be surprised; and it will be nice, too, for me when I come up to the Hall, for there will be Reggie to play with, and

sometimes for a great treat his grandmother will let me carry him off to Fircroft, and we will show him the Surprise; and perhaps Hugh will let him have a little garden of his own, and I shall sit and watch him with the other children, and Kitty will be as fond of him as possible.'

We had both forgotten Reggie's mother. What would Olga say when she knew the sort of woman Basil would bring to the Hall as its mistress? Would not her pure nature be shocked by such a contrast? would not even Basil sink in her estimation when she had seen his wife? I was about to answer her, when Jeanne appeared with the coffee; and the next moment Basil's tall figure blocked up the doorway. Reggie caught sight of him and shouted his name with all his feeble force; then he raised himself up in the hammock and stretched out his arms. It was hardly a wonder that Basil snatched him up and kissed him before he had a word for us. 'Has Reggie wanted father so badly?' he asked with that wonderful gentleness he always showed to his boy.

'Reggie always wants father,' returned the little fellow in his quaint way—'father and my Dear.'

I saw Basil look hastily across at Olga; but she was busying herself with the coffee-cups

and did not seem to see him. I wondered if he noticed her paleness. She had put on her white gown to please me. I always grumbled if Olga did not wear white in the summer; nothing suited her so well. This afternoon she had fastened a spray of jasmine at her throat; she looked so young, so child-like and simple, that it did one good to see her. I wondered why Basil suddenly knit his brows together as though something pained him; then he put Reggie back in the hammock again and turned to me.

'Aunt Catherine, I have seen the entry of my baptism at St. Sulpice. Père Lefevre—what an old brick he is!—went with me. There it was—Basil Theodore Lyndhurst. The priest who baptized me is dead now; his name was Père Delasse.'

'I am so glad you have seen it for yourself.'

'Glad that I am a Roman Catholic?' with an amused glance at me. 'You will be sorry to hear, then, that I was re-baptized at Leeds; but I have found out more than that. Miss Leigh, do you think Aunt Catherine is too tired to drive with me again to St. Croix? it is a beautiful evening, and I have a fiacre at the door, and when we have finished our coffee——'

'Oh, Basil, do you mean——'

'That we have found Lizette Dupont? That

is exactly what I do mean. That old trump—I beg his pardon—Père Lefevre had discovered her; she is still alive, you see, and as brisk and sensible at seventy-five as she was at fifty; she told his reverence that she was not much over fifty when she became my bonne.'

'Have you seen her, Basil?'

'No,' he replied, laughing. 'I could not accomplish everything in three hours and a half. I was more than two hours with Monsieur Lefevre, and he gave me something to eat; then we went to St. Sulpice and spent another hour, and here I am.'

'And you want me to go with you?'

'Yes; but not until you have finished your coffee; there is no hurry; it is only five now. Miss Leigh, I am afraid you will owe me a grudge for carrying off Aunt Catherine; but you can understand how anxious I am to establish my own identity.'

'Yes,' she said gently, 'I can understand that, Mr. Basil, and I will go and fetch Aunt Catherine's bonnet and her lace shawl—for there is no need for her to fatigue herself unnecessarily; and then I will put Reggie to bed, for I can see he is growing tired.'

She moved away as she spoke, and I could see Basil was watching her closely; when she had disappeared into the house, he said:

'Aunt Catherine, you have known Miss Leigh for years—since she was a little girl; does she ever think of herself at all?' and without waiting for my answer he continued: 'But I am going to carry Reggie in myself, for he is growing quite heavy. Do you think you can sit on my shoulder again, old fellow?' and as Reggie screamed with delight at the idea, he was carried off in the old fashion.

Basil had secured a pair of fresh horses, and in a very short time we were rattling down the steep stony roads that led to St. Sulpice. By-and-by we had to descend, and enter a sort of blind alley. The houses looked poor and squalid; but one at the end had a more respectable appearance. The step before the door had been freshly scoured; some plants blocked up the little window. A young woman with a baby in her arms was talking volubly to a man in a blue blouse. Basil walked up to her with his cap in his hand.

'Madame, it is here that Lizette Dupont lives?'

Mais oui, vraiment; monsieur was perfectly correct. She was Lizette Dupont's granddaughter, and this was Gustave, her husband. Le bon père had already enlightened them; they were to expect une dame Anglaise, who had les affaires with the grand'mère; would madame

and monsieur enter? The place was dark; but they would become accustomed to theo bscurity. And she was discoursing still volubly when a shrill voice from within was heard chiding her for her delay.

'Tiens! thou hast been a chatterbox from thy birth, Marie! Let madame enter;' and then Marie withdrew her substantial figure from the doorway.

'Be not cross, little mother,' she said tranquilly; 'the day is long enough and to spare. Entrez, madame!' and I advanced cautiously into the close, dark room.

When my eyes became used to the dim light I could see Lizette Dupont more distinctly; she was sitting knitting by the stove. She was a tiny woman, with a brown, puckered face and bead-like black eyes that looked sharply at us. She wore a close cap, rather like her great-grandchild's, and a pair of silver ear-rings dangled against her wrinkled neck.

She greeted us with shrill welcomes, and begged to know our errand. Le bon père had been mysterious. 'Une dame Anglaise wishes to question you, my daughter; there are les affaires.' That was all that had been said; and then he had asked her many questions about her past life.

I commenced cautiously; but directly Basil's

name had crossed my lips she interrupted me with a loud exclamation :

Le petit ange ! le pauvre cher enfant ! was it of him madame would speak ? But, truly, le bon Dieu was wonderful in His ways ! It might be her prayers to our blessed Lady had touched her Son's sacred heart. She had prayed, she had wept, that she might have news of the little one before she died.

She was so excited that I hardly knew how to proceed ; but Basil came to my assistance. He took her shrivelled hand, and said gently :

'That was a long time ago, Lizette. Should you know me now ?'

'You, monsieur, you !' and the little beady-black eyes seemed to look him through and through. 'Holy Virgin ! could this grand-looking monsieur, so much stronger and bigger than her Pierre—could he be her baby, her nursling, her petit Basil ?'

'Yes, truly, ma bonne—I am Basil Lyndhurst.'

'Lyndhurst ! oh, the name !' she screamed, and the skinny arms were flung round his neck, and, before he could remonstrate, she had kissed him on either cheek.

He bore it very well, however ; indeed, he told me afterwards that those kisses of his old nurse had touched him greatly.

'She is only a peasant; but once she was the only friend I had. Can I ever forget that?'

The poor old creature was so much overcome that it was some time before we could induce her to compose herself. The tears rolled down her wrinkled face, and she kept ejaculating, in a sort of ecstasy, 'Le cher petit! le joli ange!' stroking Basil's hand all the time.

He coaxed her at last to recount her little story. She wandered a good deal at first, and we found it difficult to follow her meaning, though she spoke very tolerable French. She would clench her fist whenever she mentioned Paul Lyndhurst's name—'cet homme infâme!' as she called him—but we understood her better after a little.

'I adored my mistress,' she said presently; 'she was so gentle and so handsome, and until that bad man broke her heart and drove her away she lived only for her child.'

'Hush, Lizette; you are speaking of Basil's father.'

But Basil gave me a reproving glance.

'Do not interrupt her, Aunt Catherine; it is better to hear the truth. It is not possible for me to respect my father's memory; I have told you already that Mr. Fleming is the only father I have ever known.'

'Fleming! Tiens, mon enfant! that was the

name of the English priest who carried thee away! Holy Mother! how it all comes back to me! and yet it was nearly four-and-twenty years ago.'

We exchanged looks of mutual satisfaction, and she rambled on:

'My mistress was so devoted to the child that she could not bear him out of her sight. "He is my only consolation," she would say. "Look at him, Lizette!" she would cry; "is he not a wonderful baby? and so intelligent! See, he is holding my finger now!" and so on; for she would talk of him for hours. It was a happy day for me when Père Delasse baptized him in our beautiful church. We carried him there secretly, for fear of monsieur. The English priest was absent, and madame was in great perplexity what to do.

'"My child must be baptized," she said. "If I cannot find a Protestant clergyman, I will take him to St. Sulpice. There is no time to be lost; Paul will carry us off in a day or two."

'Seest thou, mon enfant, how the blessed Virgin heard my prayers?' and her shrill voice softened into tenderness.

'Alas! the very day after our little one received the grace of baptism there was the terrible scene with monsieur, and madame fled from the house. We waited up for her all

night; monsieur's rage was awful. When she did not come back, and a week had passed, he carried us off. I was afraid to go, to trust myself with cet homme terrible; but there was the little one, so I went.

'It was a miserable life we led, wandering from town to town wherever there were picture-galleries; for monsieur cared for nothing but his pictures and the drink.

'He fell ill at last, and they removed him to a hospital. He was raving mad, they told me. What a position! picture it for thyself, mon cher. No money — hardly a sou to buy us bread; but the blessed saints were not deaf to Lizette's prayer. The woman of the house was a good Christian; she had children of her own; she pitied us.

'"There is the garret," she said; "it will shelter thee and the child. When meal-time comes I will spare thee some onion broth and some bread. Do not lose faith. When monsieur is well, he will repay me."

'Oh, she was a good creature, this Madame Gotier!

'We lived like this for weeks; le petit grew and thrived. When people saw him in the public walks, they said he was as beautiful as an angel. Many came up and spoke to him, and pressed bon-bons and cakes on him. Then

he would run to me and show me his treasures.

'"Regarde-tu, ma bonne, these bon-bons Basil has got!"

'Then they would look at me curiously.

'"He is poorly dressed; but that peasant is not his mother," they would say.

'One day the English priest came up and spoke to him, and the next day to that; and afterward le petit would clap his hands at the sight of him. He called him the kind Englishman.

'One wet day we were in our garret. Le petit had no toys, and he was playing with a bit of wood and some rags. I was in bad spirits. Madame Gotier had been up, and told me that her husband had been grumbling at her.

'"We have not enough for our own children, and thou art feeding strangers," he had said.

'And then she caught up the child and cried, and we both wept together.

'"Lizette, thou must speak to the Maire," she said presently. "I dare not anger Henri; he is, as thou knowest, of a violent temper."

'I prayed to our Mother of Sorrows with all my heart when she had left me. Le petit seemed uneasy at my tears.

'"Why dost thou weep, ma bonne?' he asked, stroking my face; "they will give us bread to-day."

'"And to-morrow, mon enfant?"

'"To-morrow — we shall see;" and he marched off with a wise look.

'What did le pauvre petit know of to-morrow? Alas! my tears could not cease. Must I take the child in my arms, and beg my way back to St. Croix? Should we not both expire with fatigue and famine?

'Mon enfant! my faith had failed; and at that moment relief was at hand. There was a knock at the door, and the English priest came in. Le petit shouted at the sight of him.

'"Hast thou brought Basil some pain-d'épice, monsieur?" he cried; and when the Englishman took him in his arms, he patted his face with his little hands.

'"Are you in trouble, my good woman?" he asked presently, sitting down beside me, while the child opened his box of bon-bons; and then it all came out—what Madame Gotier had told me, and how her husband had refused us shelter.

'"I will settle all that," he said quietly. "Will you come with me, Basil? I will bring you back to your nurse presently;" and actually le petit left his bon-bons at once.

'"May I take some pain-d'épice to Tonton and Marie?" he asked.

'Ah! it was like the dear angel, to share with others.

'From that day all went well. Monsieur Fleming—he told me that was his name—came to us every day. Sometimes he took us out with him. Henri ceased to grumble, for rent was paid for the garret, and Madame Gotier served our meals regularly. It was not always onion soup now, but sometimes roast meat and vegetables; and plenty of milk and white bread for breakfast and supper.

'"Monsieur pays for everything," Madame Gotier told me one evening. "Henri is in an excellent temper; everything is as it should be."

'I was happy then; I think I loved le petit more than my own children; I wanted those days to go on for ever; too soon they came to an end!

'One day I was summoned to the hospital. Monsieur Lyndhurst informed me abruptly that he had no further need of my services. My wages would be paid, and I might go to my own people. He had made other arrangements for Basil. The English clergyman would take him to England—this was all he told me. Was it a wonder that I believed in my own heart that he was taking him to his mother?

'I was heart-broken; but it was for the child's good. I was only an ignorant peasant, who could neither read nor write; and he was like a young prince for beauty. I let him go; I think I did not speak; something seemed to choke the words back. Le petit kissed me, and went off gaily, chattering to his new friend.

'As for me,' finished Lizette sadly, 'I went to live with Pierre, until he married again, and then Julie's daughter took me in. There were little ones in both houses; but they were not le petit. For years I never ceased to regret him; but I became comforted at last.'

'Lizette,' I interrupted in a tremulous voice that I strove in vain to steady, 'you have not described this English clergyman who took Basil away.'

'I am not good at description, madame,' she returned simply. 'Monsieur was young, but he looked worn and sad; someone told me he had had an illness. He was not handsome—not like Monsieur Lyndhurst, who had la beauté de Diable — but his face inspired one with confidence. He had gray eyes, full of gentleness, and when he smiled it seemed to lift the weight off one's heart. For the rest, his face was smooth like a boy's, and his hair was a reddish brown; he used to rumple it when he grew excited in his talk, and he would get up

from his chair and walk up and down the room, talking all the time.'

'I never could break him of the habit,' observed Basil, laughing; 'and that trick of running his fingers through his hair when he was perplexed—how well I remember it! Aunt Catherine, is it this close room that makes you look so pale? I shall be glad to get out in the air myself.'

'Let us go,' I returned quickly.

Oh, how true it all was! I felt as Lizette talked as though Robert Fleming were standing beside me; that infinitely sweet smile, those deep-set gray eyes—had I ever forgotten them?

'Must thou go, mon enfant?' exclaimed Lizette querulously. 'I have found thee only to see thee vanish again.'

'I will come again before we leave St. Croix,' he replied soothingly. 'If I can, I will bring my boy Reggie; he will remind you of the little Basil. I will tell you about him another time, but I must go now.'

He pressed some money into her hand, and shook it heartily. Marie was still talking to her husband; she eyed us curiously as we passed. The fiacre was waiting at the end of the alley, and we were soon rattling through the stony streets. Basil appeared lost in thought for some time; then he roused himself.

'Aunt Catherine,' he said quietly, 'to-morrow I shall write to Mr. Fleming and tell him everything, and you must write to my mother.'

'Would it not be better to speak to him, Basil?—there is so much to explain.'

'Of course I must speak to him. If I were in England, I would go to him at once, Aunt Catherine,' looking at me wistfully. 'Do you not think we ought to go as soon as possible?'

'You are right. When she receives my letter—the letter I am to write to-morrow—your mother will count the hours until she sees you. She will not sleep or rest until she has looked upon her son's face.'

'In that case we ought to start at once. It is Friday—we might take the Monday boat. Is not this your opinion?'

'I have not thought about it; I will tell you to-morrow,' I replied faintly.

I could decide nothing more that night. Basil was very quick. He saw at once that I was exhausted, and said no more; but when I looked at him I could see by his intent face that he was making his plans. Of course he would have his way, and, after all, it was a comfort not to decide for one's self. 'I shall leave everything to Basil,' was my last thought before I fell asleep that night.

CHAPTER XI.

GOOD-BYE TO LA MAISONNETTE.

'I never looked a last adieu
To things familiar, but my heart
Shrank with a feeling, almost pain,
Even from their lifelessness to part.'

MISS BOWLES.

AFTER all, Basil had his way, and we arranged to start by the Monday boat. Olga heard our decision very quietly. When I said a word or two of regret about her holiday being over, she stopped me at once.

'That has nothing to do with you and Mr. Basil,' she said quickly. 'Your business is finished; it is right for you to go home. We have been here seven weeks—seven weeks—and I think they have been the happiest of my life'—with a certain wistful emphasis on the words.

'But you are sorry that our visit is over, Olga?' I persisted.

'One is always sorry when a holiday is over, but that is not the right way of looking at it. Your anxiety is over, and you are going to show Mr. Basil his beautiful home, and I shall be near you, and you will tell me about everything, and Jem and I will be as happy as possible.' But, for all that, there were tears in her eyes when she kissed me. 'Dear Aunt Catherine, it has been so nice having you to myself. I shall never forget these days at La Maisonnette—never——'

Here she broke off suddenly, as Basil came into the room, and went out into the garden to join Reggie. Basil looked after her rather anxiously.

'Has she been crying?' he asked abruptly. 'Is she sorry to leave here? I do not wish to be selfish, Aunt Catherine, and if you think Miss Leigh——'

'Olga is quite ready to go,' I returned; 'she perfectly approves of our decision. As for breaking our journey and staying at an hotel for the night, she approves of that, too. She thinks, with me, that Reggie will be too tired if we go on, and that it will be far better for you to see your home in daylight.'

'I was not thinking of myself when I proposed it,' he replied, with a shade of annoyance in his tone. Basil had been slightly irritable

all the morning; the excitement and strain of the last few days were telling upon him. 'I thought a few hours' rest would be good for you and Reggie, and we should give my mother a little time to recover herself. If you or Miss Leigh think otherwise, I need not engage the rooms.'

'It is far better to do as you have arranged, Basil, my dear. It is such pleasure to have someone to take care of us. I have always had to be the business-man of the family; but I shall gladly abdicate in your favour;' but to my surprise he made no response to this little speech.

He took up some telegrams and read them, and then he said in a low voice:

'Miss Leigh does not look herself. I want you to tell her from me that if she wishes it Reggie shall be with her as much as he is now. I am too grateful to her not to spare him whenever she wants him. It shall be the same at Brookfield as it is here. Will you tell her this, Aunt Catherine?'

'Certainly I will if you wish it, Basil.'

His manner gave me a little uneasiness; he seemed far from happy, as though Olga's sadness had infected him; but after a few minutes he conquered his unaccountable depression, and showed me the letter he had written to Mr. Fleming.

'I have sent a telegram, too,' he said presently; but I was so absorbed with the contents of the letter that I forgot to ask him, then or afterwards, what he had said in his telegram. There was so much to arrange that day—letters to write and bills to pay, and all sorts of commissions to give Basil when he went to the town.

He did not come back until Reggie was asleep and Olga had joined me in the salon. He found us sitting at the open window, looking out on the barn and the moonlit court.

'It is such a delicious evening!' he said coaxingly; 'would not you and Miss Leigh like a stroll on the common before supper? You have not been out of the house all day, Aunt Catherine!'

'But you must be so tired, Basil.'

'Tired!' with a contemptuous laugh; 'why, I could walk ten more miles with ease. Miss Leigh, I hope you will join us. Monsieur Perrot has been prophesying rain to-morrow; so perhaps it may be our last walk together at St. Croix.'

'Very well,' she replied gently, rising at once from her seat, and we followed Basil into the lane.

We strolled past the little grove and down the common, towards Sefton Point; but he

would not let us pause there, so we went down the steep path, by the bathing-house, to the sands below. Just as were passing it Basil addressed Olga for the first time:

'Do you remember that morning when you called to us to take shelter from the rain? It was one of the many kindnesses for which I have to thank you—one of the things I shall never forget. I hope you do not think I am ungrateful if I say little about them.'

'I think it is your nature to be grateful, Mr. Basil,' she answered quietly; 'but you have nothing for which to thank me. I have always pleased myself in what I have done. It is so pleasant to serve one's friends.'

'We are friends, then, Miss Leigh?'

I thought it rather odd of Basil to make this speech when Olga had shown him such real friendship; but she answered him quite naturally:

'Oh yes; I hope so. I should be very sorry to believe otherwise.'

'And I, too;' but he spoke so much under his breath that I doubted if she heard him. Then he turned to me and asked me to take his arm. I was walking so slowly that he was sure I was tired. He spoke in his old affectionate way. Perhaps he already knew how I loved to lean on that strong young arm.

We stood for a long time looking at the silvery waves as they shimmered and sparkled in the moonlight. We were all very silent at first until Olga began to talk in her gentle, rapid way.

'I shall always like this bay; but I think I prefer the wide open sea at St. Genette, where the big waves roll in and break into white surf on the shore. It is more real, somehow. Do you know what I mean?' half turning to Basil as though she were addressing him.

'I think I can guess,' he returned; 'there is more freedom. It gives one a greater sense of power. One can imagine what the sea looks like hundreds of miles away; but, all the same, I should have thought this quiet, peaceful bay would have suited your taste better.'

'You think I am tame in my ideas,' she replied, with a touch of impatience. 'You are wrong; you do not know me. This peace, this tranquillity, might become a little monotonous in time; it is more suited for age than youth. I am not quite so prim and quiet as you think. I am afraid I like change—variety, even storms; yes, even storms,' with a little laugh; 'it is like life. Things are for ever changing in life—hopes and fears, joys, disappointments, miseries, all come tumbling to our feet like the big waves at St. Genette.'

'I think there are no miseries in store for you,' he answered quickly. 'If I were a prophet, I should prophesy smooth things of your future. After all, your life will be like this bay—there will be no billows mountain high to engulf your little bark.'

'There are storms even in this bay,' she replied, smiling. 'People have been drowned —Jeanne told me so. Your smooth things may be deceitful. I do not think you are a true prophet. Do you know, when I was a child I wanted to be a martyr;' and actually she related to him the childish incident of the scorched finger. She told it so prettily, too, with a pathetic rendering that took away all desire to laugh.

I do not know what Basil thought of it, but he said:

'Poor little thing! Poor innocent little child!'—half to himself.

'So you see I shall never make a martyr.'

'Why not?' he returned. 'Because you have failed once? Do you think perfection is to be achieved in one attempt? You must ask Aunt Catherine's opinion—it is not for me to talk to you.'

'But I wish you to talk to me,' she replied playfully.

'I cannot, Miss Leigh. I have made too

many mistakes in my own life to set people right with theirs. How can you ask a man who has trampled on his own ideals, and who has squandered all his priceless treasures in return for a passing gratification, to preach faith to such an one as you? Mr. Fleming is your sort; he would talk to you for hours.'

'Mr. Basil,' she said quickly, 'I thought you said just now that we were friends. Have you forgotten that already?'

'No; certainly not,' looking at her in some surprise.

'Well, then, I do not like my friends to paint themselves in such black colours; it is not kind to Aunt Catherine, or to yourself. What does it matter if you have made mistakes, except that you must bear the consequences as patiently as you can? So many people make mistakes, and are sorry, and then do better, and——'

'But there is one mistake that can never be rectified,' he answered in a low voice.

I knew at once that he was thinking of his wife, but I could not tell if Olga understood him; it was not possible for either of them to speak quite plainly.

'If it cannot be rectified, you must just make the best of it,' she answered. 'I suppose if we sow tares of our own free will we cannot

expect corn to grow up. Is that not true?'

'Yes, I suppose so,' he replied gloomily; but she would not let him finish in that tone.

'You must not speak so, as though everything would not come right some day. Life is not for ever. You will not take your mistakes with you up above. Perhaps—who knows?—they may be set right here.'

'Never—never!' between his clenched teeth.

'Never mind,' she returned cheerfully; 'then you must just put up with them as they are. It will not be so hard when you are in your beautiful home, and you have your mother and Aunt Catherine and Reggie. You will have so much to do; there will be your tenants, and perhaps you may enter Parliament; and when you are doing good with all your might and helping other people to be good too, you will not find much time for thinking of past mistakes. Am I not right, Aunt Catherine?'

'Yes, my darling; Basil will find this out for himself one day.'

'What am I to say to you two good women?' returned Basil with suppressed emotion. 'I think I had better say nothing for fear I should make an ass of myself; but you shall see—you shall see—if I am not a better man from this day.'

'It will all come right,' she said cheerfully; and then she walked a little farther to the edge of the sea, and we heard her singing the verse of a hymn softly to herself:

'Brief life is here our portion;
Brief sorrow, short-lived care;
The life that knows no ending,
The tearless life, is there.'

Basil made no remark, and we walked on. Once we looked back; Olga was still standing motionless in the same position. The moonlight shone on her white dress, and on her uplifted face. She had thrown a light woollen scarf over her head. In the strange silvery light she looked like some beautiful picture.

'Do you know of what she reminds me now, Basil?'

'No,' he answered rather shortly.

'Of some picture I have seen of Christiana about to cross the river. The drapery looks just the same, and there is the water.'

'I thought Christiana was an old woman,' he answered curtly. 'To my mind, Miss Leigh rather resembles Mercy or Phœbe.'

Evidently my fancy did not please him, for he called to her somewhat peremptorily:

'It is getting late, Miss Leigh, and Aunt Catherine is very tired;' and she ran towards us at once.

'I suppose I must not ask what you were

thinking about just now?' remarked Basil, as she joined us.

'I was only saying good-bye to it all,' she returned, looking at him a little sadly. 'It has been such a lovely time, and this is such a dear place!' and then she came round to my side and took my arm, and we went slowly up by the washing-pool, and under the dark over-hanging trees; and it seemed to me that neither of them spoke again until we reached home, and then Basil said he had a headache, and did not want his supper.

Olga and I went to church the next morning, while Basil stopped with Reggie; and in the evening Olga took his place. We spent the afternoon in the garden, and Basil made me come with him and say good-bye to the pavilion; he did not ask Olga to come too.

'It is only for you and me,' he whispered. 'Do you think I shall ever forget that night, Aunt Catherine, when I was sick with famine and could not touch food; and yet I could take it from your hand like a child.'

We went to church together after that, leaving Olga with Reggie. Basil had been a little quiet and subdued all day, but he became like his old self directly he found himself alone with me. In the course of our walk he spoke a great deal of his mother and Aline.

'I want you to tell me what I am to do,' he said presently. 'I have been lying awake for hours thinking of the future. I know what my duty is to Aline, and yet how am I to do it without causing misery to you and my mother? I want you to advise me and help me.'

'My dear,' I replied after a moment's hesitation, 'I am old-fashioned, and have old-fashioned notions.'

'You mean,' he returned quickly, for he always seemed to understand the slightest hint, 'that I must act up to the spirit as well as to the letter of my marriage vows—for better for worse—and it has been for worse all along.' A bitter sigh escaped him, and then he went on: 'I have tried to be a good husband to her—indeed I have tried; but it is she who has failed in her wifely duty. Aunt Catherine, I should never have left her as I have if she had said a word to keep me; her sullenness has driven me away. I believe in my heart that she is happier without me; last night I was thinking that perhaps it would be better for her to stay with George.'

'Basil, my dear boy, would that be right?'

'I think it would be the lesser of two evils. If Aline be at the Hall, she will make your and my mother's life wretched; she is safer with George; in some way I think I irritate

her. I could make her an allowance, and Reggie and I could go and see her sometimes!'

I was silent. It would be easier so; our poor boy would in some degree recover his lost freedom. But again I asked myself, Would it be right? Could anyone absolve him of the responsibility he had taken on himself?—'Those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder.' As I thought of those awful words I shuddered.

Basil was watching my face as though to gain the clue to my thoughts. I repeated the words aloud; he seemed to shiver as he heard them.

'Don't, Aunt Catherine!'

'My dear, she is your wife; you are responsible in God's sight for that poor girl; she is the mother of your boy—of your little lost angel. In spite of her grievous infirmities, she has been a true wife to you.'

He flushed up at that.

'She has never cared for any other man,' he said proudly.

'In her own way she loves you. No, do not shake your head. I have gathered this from your own words. You have no right to refuse her the shelter of your home, unless she tells you that she wishes to remain with her brother.'

'She will never tell me that.'

'Are you sure of that, Basil?'

'Quite sure. You do not know Aline; she is proud, too, in her way; she always wanted to marry a gentleman—to live above her station; she likes soft, luxurious living—handsome clothes—dainty food; she would like to drive in her carriage. George cannot gratify her tastes; I have only to say "Come," and she will leave him at once.'

'And yet you think she will be happier with him?'

'After a time—yes; these things will only satisfy her until they have lost their novelty. She has got the demon of unrest within her; neither I nor any living man can make Aline happy. I am telling you the whole truth; when she comes to the Hall, there will be misery in store for us all.'

'It will not be so bad as you think, Basil,' I returned, anxious to soothe him. 'In a small house it might be so; but when you see the wing we call the Dower House, you will take a more cheerful view of things. There are two large sitting-rooms; there will be no necessity for us even to have our meals together. Aline need never see us unless she likes.'

'Aunt Catherine,' he remonstrated, 'is it to me you are saying this? Do you think I am so happy that I shall not need you every day of

my life? Will there be anyone dearer to me or more honoured than you?'

'Basil—your mother!'

'I do not know my mother,' impatiently; 'she is not my friend as you have been. How do I know how things will be between us? It is you to whom I shall turn for comfort when Aline'—and then he stopped, and went on bitterly—'yes, I will ask her to come; I will not shirk my duty. Will that content you?'

'Yes,' I replied, pressing his arm. 'I ask nothing but to see you do your duty. Basil, when you go and fetch your wife I will go too.'

'You!' he exclaimed, with a start; and then he said gratefully, 'But that is so like your goodness!'

'My dear, what nonsense! You are one of us now. Your burthens are ours. Oh, I know well what Virginia will say when she hears your story! She has such a good heart. She will say, "Bring your wife to me, Basil, and let me try to be a mother to her;" and nothing will exceed her gentleness. Aline will not be able to resist her when she sees herself surrounded by all this kindness. She will not be sullen any longer.'

I think he was too much touched to answer, and we walked on in silence. It was sweet to me to hear the assurances of his affection,

and yet in my heart I felt as though I were robbing Virginia. She had still to win him.

Olga was singing to herself in the dusk when we returned; we could hear the clear, sweet notes through the open window. Basil made me stand in the court-yard for a long time listening to them.

'She will not sing like that unless she believes herself alone,' he said by way of explanation; and, indeed, I had never heard her sing so well.

The rest of the evening passed very peacefully. After supper, we sat round the window —still in the dark—and talked; at least, Basil talked. Olga was rather quiet. He wanted to hear about all the people on the estate; the names and private history of the tenants—his curiosity on the subject was insatiable.

'I mean to be interested about everybody and everything,' he finished, when I declined to enlighten him any more.

I think we were all a little tired that night; but Olga came into my room to look at Reggie in his sleep.

'It is for the last time,' she said softly, as she kissed his closed eyelids. 'He belongs to you now, Aunt Catherine.'

I had given her Basil's message, and I

reminded her of this, but she only shook her head.

'Everything will be different,' she returned rather sadly. 'Reggie will have his mother and his grandmother and you ; he will not need me then. Mr. Basil is very kind ; but he does not understand that things must be different ;' and then she went away without looking at him again.

I thought of Reggie's baby-words, 'I shall always want father and my Dear ;' and I could not help thinking that Olga might be wrong.

The next morning Basil took Reggie down to St. Genette to see Lizette, while Olga and I completed our packing. They drove there and back, so as to save the child any fatigue. They both looked wonderfully bright on their return.

'Lizette was quite bewildered at first,' Basil said, laughing ; 'she took Reggie for me. We could not make her understand for a long time. Reggie was quite alarmed. "Reggie is Reggie!" he kept saying ; so at last she was convinced. "He is thy image, mon cher!" she said presently. "I am growing old ; my eyes are dim. I thought surely it was mon petit." Ah, well, we have left her happy, poor old soul! so it is a good morning's work, after all.'

We sat in the little grove all the afternoon,

and Jeanne served us our coffee there. I missed Olga after a time, and Basil said he would go in search of her. He seemed to know instinctively where she was to be found.

It was growing late, so I dressed Reggie and myself. The fiacre was at the door, and Jules and Jeanne were bringing out the luggage. Rollo was with his mistress. I felt a little anxious at Olga's delay, and went out in the lane to look for her. She and Basil were just coming down the field-path.

'There is Aunt Catherine,' I heard her say; and they quickened their steps.

I thought Olga seemed a little excited. She slipped her hand in my arm as I stood waiting for the luggage to be strapped on the fiacre. The sun was just setting; a sort of glorified stillness seemed to pervade the scene. How peaceful it all looked—the old house, with its brown shutters, its open windows; the courtyard, with its sycamore; the steep, shady lane; the cornfields! There were the chickens scratching in the dust as usual; the gray and white kittens frisking on the doorway; Jeanne clattering to the gate with one package after another.

Basil assisted us into the fiacre in silence, and then followed us and took Reggie on his knee.

'Good-bye to La Maisonnette!' exclaimed

Olga, as Jules cracked his whip. Her voice was so sad that we both looked at her. Were there tears in her eyes, or was it only the sunlight? 'Good-bye to La Maisonnette, and the dear, beautiful days that have been so happy!'

CHAPTER XII.

'AULD LANG SYNE.'

'But I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.'

'*Julius Cæsar.*'

'He has my heart yet, and shall have my prayers
While I shall have my life.'

'*Henry VIII.*'

We had a calm passage, and the September night was so warm and pleasant that we remained late on deck. Olga seemed to enjoy pacing up and down in the starlight. She yielded reluctantly to my proposition at last to seek our berths, and secure two or three hours' sleep; but, after all, the suggestion was a wise one, as it enabled us to join Basil at breakfast feeling tolerably refreshed.

I think we all found the journey from Southampton a little irksome. Reggie, who was still weak from his recent illness, curled himself up

on Olga's lap, and was soon fast asleep. Every half-hour Basil begged to relieve her, but she always refused.

'Do let me keep him,' she pleaded. 'He is so light that I can hardly feel his weight.'

But, for all that, she looked a little weary when we arrived at Waterloo.

Basil had secured rooms for us at Victoria. It was quite early in the afternoon as we drove up to our hotel; but Reggie was already asking to be put to bed, so we felt we had done wisely to break the journey. It was arranged that he was to sleep with Olga that night; she had begged it as a favour. We were showed at once to our rooms; and when Reggie had had his tea and was comfortably tucked up in bed, we left him under the charge of the chamber-maid, and went down to our sitting-room.

Dinner was on the table, and as soon as we had finished we drew our chairs round the open window and looked down on the animated scene below. A stream of vehicles passed every moment; the foot-passengers were jostling each other on the pavement; eager faces, gay dresses, children's voices—noise, movement everywhere. Olga gazed down upon it all with a grave, abstracted face. Perhaps at that moment her thoughts were far away. Most likely she was recalling a different scene—a steep,

shady lane, with fern-covered banks, the blue water of the bay shining in the sunlight; a certain brown gate with a sycamore over it. Near us a bell was ringing for the evening service; a woman was singing in the square. We could hear her voice—a little cracked, but not without a rude sort of melody—'In the gloaming'—oh, that pitiful old song, with its sweet, reproachful plaint! I seemed to hear it in a sort of dream. I was thinking how Brookfield would look to-morrow. I was longing to hear the rooks cawing over my head, to see the elms with the evening light on them, to feel Virginia's arms round me. I woke up with a start. Olga was watching me. There was a smile on her face.

'Where is Basil, my dear?'

'He has gone down to smoke his cigarette in the square. He will not be long. Do you know you have been asleep, Aunt Catherine? We would not disturb you.'

'I thought I was at Brookfield. Ah, the woman has stopped singing now. I am so tired of that song. I think I will go and look at Reggie, just to see he is all right. I shall not be long, and then we will have some tea to wake us up.'

Reggie was asleep, and the chamber-maid—a pleasant-looking young woman—was still

beside him. Her work was over for the evening, she said. She could wait until the young lady came to relieve her, so I went down again. Our sitting-room was at the end of a long corridor. As I walked slowly down it, a gentleman coming up the staircase attracted my attention. He was a tall man, with iron-gray hair, and from his dress was evidently a clergyman. Something in his walk struck me as familiar. The next moment he accosted me.

'Would you be so good as to tell me——' he began, and then he stopped. I suppose I was looking at him strangely.

'Mr. Fleming!'

'Catherine—good heavens!'

And then for a moment there was no other word. I think for the minute he could not speak. It was so sudden, so unexpected, after all those years.

I am afraid my first speech was wholly stupid.

'How could you recognise me?'

'I might ask you the same question,' and he gave a nervous laugh. 'It was your expression, and the way you looked at me; but——'

He did not finish his sentence, but I could see then the old keen look that used to read me so truly.

In spite of the joy of this meeting, I shrank a little from his scrutiny.

'I have changed, of course—eight-and-twenty years would change anyone. If you had passed me, I should have had no right to be hurt. A man is different. A woman ages more quickly.'

I hardly knew what I was saying in my nervousness, for he was still holding my hand, and the clear gray eyes were still reading me.

'Eight-and-twenty years! is it really so long as that, Catherine?—I beg your pardon, Miss Sefton; but'—dropping my hand and looking away from me—'I should have known you anywhere; you are wonderfully little changed considering! We are both middle-aged people; but my life has been a hard one. I shall be glad to hear that yours has been smooth.'

I forgot to return any answer to this, though he spoke in a questioning tone. Oh, I knew well that his life had been hard! It was stamped on his thin, careworn face; the weary stoop of his shoulders told it. In a certain sense he had aged more than I had; only the vivid brightness of his eyes, and the quick, energetic voice, recalled the Robert Fleming of old. He had grown gray, too; but I had known that before.

More than one person had passed and had

looked at us curiously; every moment some door opened into the corridor.

'We cannot stop here,' I said hurriedly. 'Our sitting-room is just by; will you come in?'

'I will come by-and-by,' he returned rather absently; 'but there is a friend I must see first. Number eighty-four. Yes, that was what they told me downstairs.'

'Number eighty-four is our sitting-room,' I observed, smiling.

He looked so perplexed at this that I was about to explain, when an exclamation behind us made us turn quickly. Basil was springing up the staircase three steps at a time.

'So you have come?' was all he said; but the look the two men interchanged, and the way they grasped each other's hand, was enough to tell me what they were to each other. As for Mr. Fleming's face, it was illuminated.

'My dear boy, have I ever failed to come when you sent for me?'

'Never—never, my dear old friend!'

'Basil, do you mean to tell me that you sent for Mr. Fleming?'

'Why, of course!' with an astonished look at me. 'I told you that I telegraphed from St. Croix. Have you forgotten that, Aunt Catherine?'

But before I could answer Mr. Fleming interrupted us; he was looking from one to the other in the utmost perplexity.

'Do you know this lady, Basil? She used to be a friend of mine in the old time.'

'So she told me. Look here, Mr. Fleming: you ought to have waited for my letter—it would have explained everything—instead of rushing up to London in this impulsive way. I was thinking about you just now as I was smoking in the square. "I shouldn't wonder if the dear old man puts in an appearance to-night," that was what I said to myself; and then, as I came upstairs, I saw you and Aunt Catherine together.'

'My dear boy, will you answer my question? Are you a relative of my old friend, Miss Sefton?'

But, after all, I would not let Basil answer.

'He is Virginia's son!' I returned quickly. 'Basil is her boy, and mine. He is our father's heir—his own lawful grandson; and it is you—you who have cherished our boy all these years! Thank God that we have met at last, and I can thank you for all your goodness to Basil!'

He was very much surprised; he grew quite pale with emotion. I do not think he could have heard such news and not be moved by it.

'Come,' said Basil, throwing his arm lightly over his shoulders, 'we cannot stand out here any longer talking about our private affairs. There is only Miss Leigh in the sitting-room, and she knows everything. Come in, Aunt Catherine,' and we followed him at once.

Olga certainly looked surprised at our abrupt entrance; but at Basil's first word she came up to Mr. Fleming and gave him her hand.

'You are Mr. Basil's friend,' she said in her pretty girlish way. 'Oh, we know all about you; he is always talking of you! I am so glad that you have come at last; it is a great pleasure—is it not, Aunt Catherine?' and then she gave me a quick, loving look. 'Now I must go to Reggie; and there is so much that you three will have to say to each other;' and before any of us could stop her she had left the room.

I sat down by the open window, and left Basil undisturbed to tell his story. Mr. Fleming made him go back to the beginning. He described his life in the pavilion; his first meeting with Olga; our kindness to Reggie; the child's illness, and all that followed; Père Lefevre's story; and the visit to Lizette Dupont.

'Ah, poor Lizette! I remember her well!' observed Mr. Fleming, with much feeling.

'She was a faithful creature. But for her you would have fared badly, Basil. How strange, how marvellous, it all seems! To think all these years I had a Sefton living under my roof; that the boy I thought was friendless and penniless was the heir to Brookfield Hall! Leave me to think over it for a moment; your story has almost taken my breath away.'

'Aunt Catherine shall make us some tea,' returned Basil gaily. 'I am thirsty with so much talking. I have had more than my share.' Then, as he followed me to the table, he said curiously: 'What was the waiter saying to you just now? was it about Miss Leigh?'

'Yes; Olga had pencilled me a little note. Reggie was awake and she could not leave him, so she wished us all good-night. The chambermaid had brought her some tea, and she was quite comfortable, and she said again how glad she was Mr. Fleming had come.'

'Miss Leigh knows exactly when to efface herself. Yes, it is just like her; but she would not have been in the way.' Mr. Fleming overheard him as he joined us.

'Who is that young lady with the pretty voice—whom I fear that I have banished from the room? is she a protégée of yours, Miss Sefton?'

'Yes, Virginia and I are very fond of her. Olga is charming when one knows her well. Do you remember Fircroft, that old red house near the church? she lives there with her brother. Mr. Leigh is our curate-in-charge.'

'Yes, I remember Fircroft; it was to let in my time; old Miss Crowder had just died. When I have time I must ask after a few of my Brookfield friends. I have a tenacious memory—it will astonish you; but there is another subject we have not mentioned: I have not yet asked after your wife, Basil.' His voice was grave, and he looked fixedly at the young man as he spoke.

'She is well; at least, I believe so,' returned Basil in an embarrassed tone. 'She is with George at present.'

The anxious look deepened on Mr. Fleming's face.

'My dear boy, you have not left her?'

'Only for a month or two; one must have change sometimes. Holloway was driving me mad, so I thought it best to go away for a little. She let me take the boy; I couldn't have gone without him; she knew that.'

'And things are no better?'

'They never will be. George manages to keep her straight for a little; but it never lasts long—it never can with Aline.'

'Poor girl! poor girl! and yet in her way she is good to you; are you'—and then he looked at me and hesitated—'do you mean to bring your wife to Brookfield Hall?'

'I suppose I must;' but I interposed:

'We shall go and fetch her together. Basil's burthens are ours now; we must share them together. If he be unhappy, we shall be unhappy too.'

A peculiar softness came into Mr. Fleming's eyes; but he looked at Basil, not at me.

'You will not be unhappy, my boy, with such friends to help you. Your wife is young, there may be hope still; do not leave her with her brother too long. Mr. Barton is a good man in his way; but we must not shift our responsibilities on to other men's shoulders; no one can relieve you of a husband's duty to that poor girl.'

Basil flushed as though the advice were unpalatable to him; he threw up his head a little proudly. 'I know; you need not tell me,' he said bitterly. 'I have brought the misery on myself and must abide by it. If a man acts like a fool, he must pay for it.'

It was the old reckless tone. As he heard it, Mr. Fleming rose and put his hand on his shoulder. 'I am at my old quarters, and it is getting late; will you walk across the Park with

me ?—you can smoke your cigarette and we can finish our talk.' And then I knew that he wanted to be alone with Basil, his boy as well as mine—that my presence was a restraint. I thought Basil agreed to this proposition a little reluctantly ; perhaps he dreaded the clear-sighted judgment of his mentor ; but Mr. Fleming did not appear to notice it. The sudden leave-taking troubled me ; he had said so little to me or I to him ; it was Basil who had engrossed him. A chilly feeling of disappointment crept over me as I thought how long it might be before we met again.

To my surprise he seemed to answer this thought.

'It is not good-bye,' he said quietly ; 'Basil tells me that you do not leave until mid-day to-morrow. I should like to come and see you again—may I ?'

'I shall be very glad.'

'Then I will come.' He seemed to wait until Basil had left the room, and then he came a little closer.

'I should like to talk to you about Basil ; he has been very dear all these years—he is still—I have missed him terribly.'

'I am afraid he has not always treated you well.'

'Never mind that now ; with all his faults he

has been like a son to me. Well, it has been a great pleasure finding you two together; good-bye — God bless you!' and before I could answer he was gone.

The room looked a little solitary, and I went up to Olga. She was sitting by the open window; she seemed surprised to see me.

'Has Mr. Fleming gone already?'

'Yes, dear, and he has taken Basil with him. He wanted a long quiet talk with him. Why have you not gone to bed, Olga? And you are so tired.'

'Not so very tired'—wrapping my arms round her and leaning against me, a favourite action of hers in some moods. 'Aunt Catherine, were you not very glad to meet your old friend again?'

'Very glad indeed.'

'I should have liked to have seen more of him; but of course I knew I was in the way. He is just what I thought. Do you know, his face reminds me a little of yours. No; I cannot explain it'—as I uttered an incredulous exclamation—'but you have both got the same clear, earnest look—what Jessie calls a trustable look.'

'My dear, I am very much obliged to you and Jessie.'

'He is not young, of course—his hair is

quite gray. How old did you say he was ?'

'Mr. Fleming must be fifty; his work has aged him.'

'Yes; and then his life has not been a happy one.'

'We do not know that, Olga,' rather quickly.

'Do we not ?'—with a little laugh. 'Well, I must not keep you here talking. I suppose he is coming again to-morrow ?'

'I do not know why you should suppose any such thing; but for once you happen to be correct.'

'It would be very strange if he did not come. He and Mr. Basil must want to be together.'

'Oh yes, of course;' and then she kissed me affectionately and let me go.

I was glad to be alone with my own thoughts. After all these years God had granted me my wish: I had looked in the face of Robert Fleming again—the man to whom I had plighted my girlish troth, for whose sake I had lived single—and the meeting had not disappointed me. I had seen the quick flash of joy in his eyes as he pronounced my name. Would he have called me Catherine in that momentary confusion if the past had been wholly obliterated from his mind ? if the girl Catherine had been forgotten ? I held to this thread of comfort

firmly, when the cold waters of common-sense came to damp my enthusiasm.

Let me confess it: I did not long remain happy. Many a woman of my age has these sudden chills of introspection and retrospection, these dim brooding moods, when we are brought face to face with our inner selves, when we look with dreary, pitying eyes on our dead youth, on the hopes that lie in faded heaps like autumn leaves. All those years, in which we might have been so happy—does not the strain run after that fashion? All those fresh womanly feelings wasted in waiting for something that never came—in that wistful watching that too often ends in heart-sickness and despair!

After all, if he had cared for me as I had cared for him, would he not have trampled down his pride underfoot and came back to me—not in my father's lifetime, perhaps, but when his death had set me free? And—and—I will write it here—I had expected him month after month, and year after year, and he had made no sign! No; he had never come back to the Catherine he had so tenderly loved, whom, strong man as he was, it almost broke his heart to give up! But in my inmost mind I had not been angry with him. It was his notion of honour—strained and misplaced, perhaps, but

still a sense of honour—that had refused to seek out the heiress. Most likely he thought himself forgotten. He had not loved again, that was certain; and this knowledge, poor and meagre as it was, was the abiding sweetness of my life.

What poor creatures we women are! We can bear disappointment, suspense, unhappiness, but we cannot endure that one whom we love should forget us. No; this one thing we cannot bear!

It was some time before I could reason and school myself into calmness; as the bitter waters of the past, that had submerged all my youthful hopes, seemed to rise again before my eyes, a sort of dual voice seemed to oppose vague utterances.

'After all, you have had a happy life,' one seemed to say. 'Many women have to do without love and marriage—it is Kismet, Fate, the will of God. You have had your freedom, wealth, plenty of work, friends to cheer your leisure.'

'Yes, but I have been lonely through it all,' murmured that other unbidden voice. 'I have had no strong arm to lean upon; all my life I have wanted my other self. When I have seen wives with their husbands, mothers with their children, I have felt my freedom an irksome thing, my wealth mere emptiness. The will of

God! Ah, well, you are right. It may be so; but I think our heavenly Father knows why the eyes of women are so often dim, and their tears do not make Him angry.'

'Most likely you have cared for Robert Fleming more than he has cared for you,' went on the voice; 'this reflection ought to humiliate you. A little while ago you had settled to make him your heir.'

'I do not feel humiliated; such a reflection would not trouble me for a moment. What does it matter on which side the love lies? He was my master once, and taught me all I knew of good; I had no religion until he instilled it; I owe my better self to him—to his high-minded example; he loved me once: that is sufficient.'

'This is mere sophistical nonsense. At your age one should think more wisely.'

'It is the truth, and I know no other. As long as Robert Fleming lives, the world will be richer to me. I ask nothing from him but friendship, esteem, a kindly recollection of the past; more would embarrass—would trouble me—would disturb my sense of fitness. I neither ask nor desire it; but if I could only do him some good, I think I should die happier;' and with this curious confession of womanly faith I triumphed over my dissentient voice.

I grew quite reasonable at last, and

chided myself in earnest for the hours I had wasted in fruitless regrets. 'You are not the only one,' I said to myself severely, 'whom Heaven has deprived of complete satisfaction in this world. There are so many widowed lives—meek, uncomplaining ones—lives so patiently borne that even the angels must wonder at them, and you—you have had so many blessings;' and then, touched and humbled, I knelt down to say my thanksgiving, and after that I slept as sweetly as ever; and when morning came I woke quite happily, for was I not going home with Basil? and was that not happiness enough? besides which—but I have written enough on that subject.

When we met at breakfast it was Basil who looked as though he had not slept. He did not deny the charge.

'One can't stand so much excitement,' he said, laughing rather nervously. 'I suppose that long talk unsettled me, and then I kept thinking about my mother. I cannot help dreading the meeting. What am I to say to her, and she to me, when we are strangers to each other?' and then he broke off as Olga came into the room with Reggie, and it seemed a relief to him to take the little fellow in his arms. Poor Basil! I could feel for him; it was terribly embarrassing.

Mr. Fleming came quite early. Basil took Reggie half across the park to meet him, and they all came in together. Basil had almost lost that fagged, harassed look. As soon as Mr. Fleming had shaken hands with us, Basil accosted me eagerly :

'Aunt Catherine, such a capital idea has come into my head : why should not Mr. Fleming come down with us to Brookfield ?'

'To Brookfield ?' I faltered.

'Yes ; it will make things easier for all of us. I should like it. I shall feel more like myself if he is there to back me up ; and my mother ought to see him, you know.'

'My dear boy, it is you who are master ; you may surely ask whom you will to your own house.'

'I never thought of that,' with a flush ; 'and I will do nothing without your permission. Shall he come, Aunt Catherine ?'

'If he will be so good,' I returned, smiling.

Mr. Fleming had remained silent ; but I could see this wish on Basil's part touched him profoundly.

'Will you come, Mr. Fleming ?'

'Go and ask him, Reggie,' whispered Basil in his boy's ear ; and the child, in his ready, sweet obedience, ran up to him. Mr. Fleming stooped over him.

'What is it, my little fellow?' he said gently.

'Reggie wants you to come, and father, too, and my Dear——' looking round for Olga, 'and Aunt Cathie,' for he could not pronounce my name.

'What, all—everybody? I think I must come, Reggie; father's wishes have always been paramount with me. But this young lady,' looking at Olga with kindly, observant eyes, 'I think you made a mistake there;' and then he put down the child and walked to the window; and, after a moment's hesitation, Basil followed him, and they talked earnestly together; and, though Olga and I could not hear what they were saying, there was a pleased look on Mr. Fleming's face—a bright, happy look that told us volumes.

CHAPTER XIII.

'WELCOME HOME, MY DEAR.'

'O, Lord! my boy, my Arthur, my fair son!
My life, my joy, my food, my all the world!
My widow comfort, and my sorrow's cure.'

'King John.'

'O Lord, that lends me life,
Lend me a heart replete with thankfulness.'

Second Part of 'Henry IV.'

JUST before we started, I found myself alone with Mr. Fleming. I had gone upstairs to put on my bonnet, and on my return to the sitting-room I saw him standing at the window apparently lost in thought.

My entrance roused him. As he came towards me, I noticed that he looked younger and brighter than he had yesterday. His shoulders seemed to have lost their stoop. He seemed alert—full of animation.

'I am glad to have an opportunity of speaking to you,' he began quickly. 'I am afraid

my boy has been a little impulsive. Are you sure that I shall not be in the way—that Mrs. Lyndhurst will not think it an intrusion?'

'I can answer for Virginia's welcome as well as my own,' I returned gravely. 'Mr. Fleming, cannot you understand how deeply we are indebted to you? You have been our benefactor as well as Basil's. When Virginia learns how all these years you have been guarding her treasure, there will be no limit to her gratitude.'

'You must not say such things to me, Miss Sefton. It troubles me to hear them.'

'Then they shall not be said. I would not hurt you for the world. Let me tell you instead how glad I am for Basil's sake that you are with him at this crisis of his life.'

'He is very nervous about this meeting with his mother,' he said thoughtfully. 'He has confessed to me that he dreads it beyond everything. It is unfortunate that Mrs. Lyndhurst would never consent to be photographed, for he cannot picture her in the least. He seemed quite surprised when I told him what a handsome girl she used to be.'

'That is because your description does not tally with ours. Eight-and-twenty years ago, I grant you, Virginia was a beautiful creature. When you see her, you will not recognise her as you recognised me.'

'Is she so changed?'

'Changed! that is not the word. Strangers have often told me that it made their hearts ache only to look at her. Her troubles have been too much for her. Her nerves have suffered.'

'I understand—Basil told me a great deal last night.'

'He says very little about his mother to me, and I am half afraid to question him. I should like to know what he really feels about her.'

'It is difficult to judge,' he replied after a moment's hesitation. 'He is very guarded. He does not speak openly even to me. I can see he feels her desertion of him in his helpless infancy very keenly, and yet no word of blame passes his lips; but it has chilled him. No, you must not grieve,' as the tears rose to my eyes, and he looked at me very kindly. 'It is only natural he should feel it, but we must hope that mother and son will soon be drawn together.'

'I think if she fails to win his love my poor Virginia will break her heart. Any coldness on Basil's part will crush her. Mr. Fleming, will you tell him so? I have gone through so much that I feel I can bear no more.'

'I would willingly spare you all pain if I

could,' he returned gently; 'but, pardon me, I think I understand Basil better than you do. We must leave him to himself; he has a good heart. We must trust that. Any advice would only embarrass him. You saw for yourself last night how hard it is for him to take even a word from me. It has always been like that—his pride has been his bane.'

'He has never been proud with me.'

'That is because you are so gentle with him. I can see for myself how much influence you have with him already. He was talking to me about you last night. He thinks there is no one like you. You would have been pleased to hear him.'

'Mr. Fleming, will you tell me one thing: Is it your opinion that Basil is to blame at all with regard to his wife?'

He looked sorry that I had asked the question. He hesitated, and seemed unwilling to answer.

'You have put a very difficult question. I should have liked you to judge for yourself. Basil is very much to be pitied. No one could deny that he leads a wretched life with that poor girl; but it has always been my opinion that he might have done more for her in the beginning.'

'I am afraid he has ceased to love her.'

'It was never real love,' he returned warmly. 'It was just a young man's fancy for a handsome girl that would have cooled in a month or two. He very soon grew weary of her. A woman of her calibre could never hold him long. When I first saw her, I knew there would be no happiness for him in the future. Poor boy! he needed more than she could give him, and yet she loved him with all the strength of her undisciplined nature.'

'You think that Aline loves him. Basil assures me that she is quite indifferent—that she seldom speaks to him.'

'That comes of her sullen temper. She is jealous, too; and she knows that she has forfeited all claims to his respect. I believe in her way the poor girl suffers terribly. She has fits of remorse that are quite distressing to witness. I believe if Basil spoke kindly to her then she would be ready to die for him; but he has lost all heart and interest. He tells me that he never troubles himself now about her moods.'

'Mr. Fleming, you will think me hard, too; but I am afraid I take Basil's part. How is he to bear with such a woman?'

'You have not seen her,' he answered quickly. 'I should not be surprised if she interested you in spite of yourself; there are

possibilities even in her nature, poor thing! She is the victim of others' sins; an hereditary taint is in her blood. Her brother knows this, and pities and shields her; it is only her husband who has no mercy.'

'But what would you have him do? He is going to bring her home.'

'Yes, he will bring her home; but will he be good to her? Will he watch over her, and keep the deadly poison away? Will he try to wean her from her fatal habit by surrounding her with other influences, and teaching her self-respect? Will he stay with her instead of rushing away to seek distraction for himself, and taking his boy with him? Miss Sefton, you must not think me hard; my heart bleeds for him; but right is right. Basil has made that girl his wife, and he must do his duty by her, as other men have done theirs. It is no question of love; it is clear, manifest duty. This is what I have told him, and he does not contradict me.'

'No, he will not contradict you; but his life will be terribly difficult—and he is so young.'

'She is young, too.'

'Yes, I know;' and then we could say no more, as we heard Basil's voice outside.

I was glad to have had even this brief talk. I knew now what were Mr. Fleming's opinions

with regard to Aline. In some respects they corroborated the impressions I had already formed. I felt Basil had not been faultless—his long absences, his restless wanderings, his absorption in his boy, had widened the breach between husband and wife. Aline had lost all incentive to self-control; she despaired of regaining Basil's love; most likely she was trying to drown her sense of neglect and wretchedness; but, on the other hand, what superhuman patience was needed to endure the daily companionship of such a woman! It was easy for a man like Mr. Fleming to preach the duty he so nobly practised of self-abnegation; but for Basil, with his sensitive nature, his pride, his impatient irritability, it was more difficult; and in my heart I could not blame him; and he had already suffered so much.

I think but for Mr. Fleming we should have been a silent party; but he helped us all to feel more natural and at our ease. Basil's nervousness seemed to increase as we drew towards our journey's end; he talked fitfully. As we slackened speed, Olga, who had been very quiet, suddenly brightened.

'Oh, there is Jem!' she said. 'Rollo, look! there is dear old Jem!' and Rollo whined expectantly, as though he understood.

'Is that your brother?' exclaimed Basil; 'I should like to shake hands with him. What a fine-looking fellow!'

But I doubt if Olga heard him, for she was waving and kissing her hand to Jem. I smile now when I recall Jem's look of astonishment as the two gentlemen followed us out of the carriage. As Basil's dark face peered over my shoulder, I heard Jem whisper in a sort of disgusted aside:

'Why, you haven't brought that fellow Fleming over with you, surely?'

I only hoped it was not audible. Olga hardly knew how to answer, so I thought it politic to explain matters.

'This is my old friend Mr. Fleming, Jem; but now let me introduce you to my nephew, Basil Lyndhurst. Basil, this is Miss Leigh's brother, of whom you have heard so much.'

Jem's face was a study as they shook hands rather stiffly. The whole thing was so droll that Olga and I began to laugh; but this did not mend matters.

'I was not aware you had a nephew, Miss Sefton,' replied Jem, in a dignified manner, and turning very red. (He had never called me anything but Aunt Catherine for years.) 'I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lyndhurst. Olga, I have got a truck for your

luggage. I thought you would like the walk up to Fircroft.'

'Yes, I will come, Jem. Dear Aunt Catherine, good-bye until to-morrow! Give my love to Mrs. Lyndhurst.'

'But you will bring Jem with you to-morrow, Olga? I want him and Basil to be good friends.'

'I will bring him if he will come. Good-bye, Mr. Basil! Good-bye, my darling Reggie!' kneeling on the ground to kiss him.

Jem watched these proceedings a little stonily. When she had finished, he took off his hat to us all with a grand sweep, and drew Olga's hand through his arm, and hurried her away. I smiled to myself as I looked after them. Poor Olga! she would have some trouble in soothing him. Jem was not one to like mysteries; he had been too much taken by surprise, and he was ruffled in consequence. Basil made a little speech presently that amused me still more.

'Mr. Leigh seems rather haughty for such a frank-looking fellow. On the whole, he did not seem quite pleased with me.'

'You don't know Jem,' was my reply; 'he will be quite different to-morrow. He thinks Olga ought to have prepared him; he hates surprises. Never mind; there is our faithful

old Jennings with the carriage. You must speak to him, Basil.'

Basil's nervousness seemed to return as he seated himself beside me, for Mr. Fleming insisted on taking the opposite place. Olga looked up at us as we passed with a tremulous little smile, and waved her hand. Jem was still holding her arm ; he raised his hat stiffly, with the gravity of a young judge. Basil looked back at them once or twice.

'There is Fircroft,' I said presently ; 'do you hear the rooks, Basil ? Look ! we shall turn into the avenue directly—you can see the Hall now ; and—and—welcome home, my dear !'

He pressed my hand, but did not answer ; he had grown strangely pale, and there was a strained look in his eyes, as though he were expecting to see someone. How grandly the rooks were cawing over our heads—as though they were greeting the long-lost heir ! I doubt whether Basil even heard them, any more than he noticed the flecks of golden sunshine on the green turf, or the play of light and shadow in the branches of the elms. My dear old home ! How lovely it looked that September afternoon ! My eyes were misty with unshed tears ; a flood of gratitude was in my heart. Oh, how good Providence had been to us ! I looked at

Mr. Fleming; his grave answering glance, so full of unspoken sympathy, of complete understanding, satisfied me. I was not the only one to rejoice that day!

The Hall door was wide open; I could see Bennet's white head, with our old housekeeper, Mrs. Larkins, behind him. As the carriage stopped, and Reynolds sprang from the box to open the door, I saw Marsden cross the hall hurriedly, as though in search of her mistress.

I took Basil's hand as we stood together on the threshold; he had a dazed look, as though he were in a dream; he acknowledged the servants' respectful greeting almost mechanically.

'Mrs. Lyndhurst is in the drawing-room, ma'am,' Bennet said in my ear; and I put my hand on Basil's arm to rouse him.

'Come, my dear, come! We must not keep your mother waiting; she is an invalid, remember;' and I drew him on.

Once he stumbled slightly; the hall was dark after the sunshine outside, and the oak floor slippery to unused footsteps. I felt him draw his breath hard as Bennet opened the drawing-room door. And then for the moment I thought I was dreaming, too; for the Virginia who stood in the middle of the room to receive us was not the Virginia I had left—who had lived with me

all these years. For a second I did not recognise her.

The frail graceful figure that seemed always bowed by some mysterious weakness was erect and tall; in place of the straight black folds of her widowlike stuff dress, she wore black velvet, and that in spite of the summer warmth. A little head-dress of costly lace just shaded the silvery hair, and as I crossed the room I could see she had a diamond ornament at her throat, and that her hands were blazing with diamond rings—Virginia, who had not worn jewels for five-and-twenty years! But how deathly was the marble paleness of her face as she stretched out her hands tremblingly to her boy.

'My son—my own son!'

'Mother!'

Just that one word, uttered under his breath, as though that low passionate utterance compelled response and recognition; and as she looked up in his face with those pleading eyes, he stooped and kissed her quietly, reverently on the cheek. He told me afterwards that the touch of that cold thin cheek gave him a sort of shock. As for Virginia, that timid, quiet caress from the full-grown man, who was her son and yet a stranger, seemed to unseal the pent-up emotion; she trembled so violently that I thought she would have fallen, and Basil

quickly put his arm round her and drew her to a seat. She kept hold of his hand.

'You are very kind,' she gasped. 'Will you sit down beside me? you are so tall'—trying to smile—'and I—I want to see my son.'

He obeyed her at once, but he seemed nervous and embarrassed under that long fixed look. As for me, I knew what it meant; the mother's eyes were seeking some resemblance she feared to see. Oh, she had found it!

'Catherine!' How well I knew that sharp thinness of voice! 'Catherine, he is like Paul! It is Paul's mouth—his handsome mouth—and he has his father's chin. You told me in your letter that there was no likeness: you are wrong; and, look, he has Paul's hand!—I should have known that hand anywhere!'

'What does it matter?' I returned, somewhat alarmed at this; 'Basil does not take after his father in anything else.'

'No'—after a moment's hesitation—'and, after all, I am glad that it should be so; it makes him still more my son. I can see the likeness for myself. Basil'—how softly and tenderly she pronounced his name!—'you must not mind anything I have said. I have suffered so much; and all these years, these long, cruel years, I have been childless.'

'Yes, I know;' but he did not look at her as he spoke.

I could see his position tried him terribly—that he did not know what to say to her. Whose fault was it that he had been a stranger to his home all those years? that he had been forsaken in his helpless infancy and cast upon the compassion of strangers? Could he tell her so? But the thought would not be banished; it kept him silent.

An agonized expression crossed Virginia's face, as though she read his silence truly.

'Catherine, do you see? he has nothing to say to me! My son turns from me—from me, his mother! He has hardened his heart against me because of that past sin of mine! He has judged me already; and I—what shall I do?'

She wrung her hands, and it was pitiful to see her poor quivering face. It was too much for Basil; he started up, and began pacing the room. It was some minutes before he could calm himself sufficiently to speak to her, and all the time she sat, poor soul! watching him, and sighing as though her heart would break. Presently he came back to us.

'Mother,' he said almost harshly, but I saw he had some difficulty in keeping himself in hand, 'you ought not to have said that—that

should never have been mentioned between you and me. What is past is past. You are wrong; your son does not judge his mother; he has too many sins of his own.'

He sank down on the couch beside her and covered his face with his hands; his strong young frame seemed shaking with emotion.

'Virginia,' I said gently, 'Basil is right; you ought not to have spoken to him in that way. He does not wish to remember the past; you must never recall it to him. It is a new life that is beginning for you both to-day—a new and happier life.'

'Is it?' she returned softly, and she laid her hand on his arm. She was his mother, but she dare not venture on a closer caress. 'Yes, I know; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'

* * * * *

We grew calmer by degrees. Basil was the first to recover himself. I saw by his manner that he was anxious to efface the impression from Virginia's mind, to place things on a more natural footing. She had entreated him with tears to forgive her, and his answer had soothed her.

'It is not for a parent to ask forgiveness of a child,' he had said. 'My father's sins have been so great that I wonder you do not hate

me for my likeness to him. Do not let there be any such question between us.'

'Then you do forgive me, Basil?'

'What! again, mother? And, after all, I have no right; but, if you will have it, I freely forgive you. Now that is finished, and we will never refer to it again. And I want you to see my boy; you have two children, you know!'

'Your boy!' and her manner was a little bewildered.

Had she forgotten all I had told her in my letter of Basil's unhappy marriage?

'Yes—Reggie. Will you fetch him, Aunt Catherine? Do you mind? I do not know my way about the house;' and I went willingly.

It was some minutes before I returned to the room; I thought it was better to leave them together. On our way through the hall I endeavoured to impress on Reggie's mind that he was going to see his grandmother. I wanted him to say the word after me, but he refused.

'Too long,' he said, shaking his head; 'Reggie don't like it!'

I am afraid we had all spoiled him, and indulged his childish whims. He was dressed in his white sailor's suit, and, in spite of the loss of his hair, he looked so delicately pretty that I knew how Virginia would admire him.

His erect little figure was so trim and graceful; he carried his head with such dignity, and he was such a friendly, loving little creature.

He marched up straight to his father and stood beside him, looking with childish curiosity at Virginia's pale face.

'Is that lady Reggie's Gran?' he asked at last.

'Yes, dear. Will you give her a kiss?'

It was evident Reggie did not relish the idea of the kiss; but he was accustomed to obey his father's slightest word, so he put up his face at once.

'How do you do, Gran?' he said gravely; and Virginia caught him in her arms and burst into tears.

Reggie regarded her with astonished eyes.

'Has anyone been naughty, father?' he asked in great perplexity. 'Why does Gran cry?'

'Let me cry, darling; it does me good. Oh, Cathy, Cathy! look at this dear little face, and think—think of that little child I never saw—that lonely little child who never knew his mother!' and for a little while she sobbed bitterly, and refused to be comforted.

Reggie looked so frightened that Basil took him on his knee, and after a time we were obliged to send him away. Virginia was

becoming hysterical; her frail form could ill support her overcharged feelings. It was Basil who proposed sending for Mr. Fleming—I had not once thought of him. I was a little dubious as to the result, but, as it proved, Basil was right.

He had been accustomed to all forms of mental distress; his very first words as he took her hand seemed to soothe her.

'All this has been too much for you,' he said gently. 'You have no strength left to thank God for the great blessing He has vouchsafed you to-day. Miss Sefton, I think you must give your sister some wine, and then she will feel better;' and without heeding her wild sobs he said a few grave, strong words that seemed to lift her out of her self-abasement and place her on a higher level.

It was wonderful to hear him talk. He seemed to understand just how she felt.

'Basil,' he said, turning to him by-and-by, 'you have a grand task before you: you have to compensate your mother for all her past unhappiness; you have to win her love and confidence.'

'The love is won already,' she returned, with a wan smile.

'So much the better,' he returned heartily. 'But, Mrs. Lyndhurst, your son needs some-

thing more than love at your hand—he will want real help and sympathy. He has told you about his wife?'

'No,' she said timidly. 'There has been no time, and I have troubled him so; but Catherine said something in her letter. You are not happy, Basil?'

'No, mother, I am not happy. Aline is a great trouble to me.'

'Aline—is that your wife's name? My dear, you must tell me everything, and I will help you. We will both help him—will we not, Catherine? There is nothing—nothing we will not do. You shall not be unhappy, my son, if your mother can prevent it. There will be no sacrifice too great—you may be sure of that.'

'Will you do something for me now, mother?' taking her hand.

It was pathetic to see how she brightened every time he said that word; she looked at him with unutterable tenderness as he spoke.

'Yes, surely, Basil.'

'Will you go and rest now? It hurts me to see you look so frightfully pale. You are ill, though you do not say so. I should be happier in my mind if you would rest.'

'I will go, then,' rising at once. 'Cathy, will you come to me presently?—not now; I

must be alone a little. Thank you, my dear,' as Basil gave her his arm, and led her to the door.

I did not hear what she said to him, but there were a few words on her part, and then he stooped over her again and kissed her.

CHAPTER XIV.

'FRIENDS FOR LIFE.'

'Who reverenced his conscience as his being.'
TENNYSON.

'Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel.'
'*Hamlet.*'

I WAS perfectly aware of the reason that made Mr. Fleming remember suddenly that he had an important letter to write before the evening post. Like Olga, he knew when to efface himself; some unerring intuition told him that I should prefer to be alone with Basil. The moment the door closed after him, I went up to Basil and took his two hands.

'Well, my dear?'

He looked at me with an expression that was difficult to define—a curious mingling of pleasure and sadness.

'Aunt Catherine,' he said slowly, 'I am glad my mother is like that.'

'Oh, Basil! Really and truly? Then you are not disappointed in her?'

'No'—drawing a long breath—'but you must not question me too closely; you must give me time. Do you not see'—very gravely—'what a trial this has been to both of us—to her as well as to me? One hardly dared to speak for fear of wounding the other; there was a barrier across which we seemed to look at each other. Thank God it is over—that I shall never have to live through such an hour again!'

'Dear Basil, I quite understand how you felt.'

'I think when it came to the point that I would rather have walked up to the cannon's mouth than have entered that room. All these days I have been saying to myself, "If I should be disappointed in my mother!" I was growing quite morbid over the idea.'

'Very few men have to pass through such an ordeal; but it has ended well.'

'Yes, it has ended well; no one could have been kinder. Do you know, Aunt Catherine, I was glad in my heart when she spoke of my likeness to my father; it seemed somehow more satisfactory; but I would rather have resembled my mother.'

'I am so pleased to hear you say that.'

'Why, she is lovely!' he returned quickly;

'When she spoke, something in her voice reminded me of you; but you are not really alike.'

'Not in the least.'

'No, there could not be two sisters more unlike each other. I can understand now what Mr. Fleming told me about her beauty—she is very sweet-looking; but of course one can see what her life has been; there is one thing I am sure that she needs: a son to take care of her.'

'My dear, it makes me so happy to hear you talk in this way! I was so afraid——' but something in his look warned me not to say any more.

'I know what you were going to say,' he returned; 'but that is a forbidden subject; for heaven's sake, Aunt Catherine, let the dead past bury its dead. Why should we try to disinter the ghastly thing? That is the worst of women, they are so fond of moral dissection; even a good woman knows the use of a scalpel.'

'You are very hard on us,' pretending to look offended; but he was too much in earnest to heed me.

'Men are more generous; when they forgive, they forgive thoroughly, and with no arrière-pensée; that is how I feel about things. We must wipe out the past; there must be no allu-

sion to it—no painful remembrance : this is what I feel strongly. Do you not see how much need I have to forget ? If I had lived here under my mother's roof, I should never have met Aline. I—I dare not think of it ;' there was a cloud upon his face as he spoke—a concentrated bitterness in his voice ; then he recovered himself : ' For pity's sake let me keep that thought away ; it would madden me to think of what might have been. Aunt Catherine,' looking at me wistfully, ' I want to be a better sort of fellow ; I want to do my duty, and not to think of my own happiness. You must help me with Aline. You must keep me up to things ; neither she nor I must disgrace my mother, who has suffered so much all her life.'

I was so touched that I could not answer him ; if only Mr. Fleming had heard him !

' Do not let us talk any more,' he said presently ; ' all this has taken it out of me ; I feel dead tired, as though I had walked twenty miles. Will you come out in the garden ? a little fresh air will do me good ; do you mind ?'

As though I minded anything ! He opened the glass-door, and we stepped out on the lawn. I showed him everything ; the Lady's Walk, and my favourite Elizabethan garden, with the sundial and peacocks. He wanted to fetch Reggie at once to see them ; but I told him the

child would be having his tea in the nursery, and begged him not to disturb him. I could see Reggie was in his thoughts perpetually.

'Fancy the little chap chasing butterflies over that lawn!' he said once, 'and how pleased he will be with the honeysuckle arbour! He must have a garden of his own—that little bed we passed just now. And he will take up his flowers to see how they grow! and he will water them six times a day out of his new watering-pot; can't you fancy him doing it?' Then, by-and-by: 'That was a velvet dress my mother wore, was it not? I always had a fancy for velvet. Don't you think Reg might have a velvet suit with a lace collar? he would look like a picture! I saw a little boy once dressed like that, and it struck me then how it would suit Reggie.'

'Oh yes, he would look lovely,' and, just to humour him, I discussed the rival merits of ruby and dark-blue velvet. I saw that he was trying to fling off his grave mood. When we had explored the garden, and I wanted him to come in and see the house, he shook his head.

'I could not take in any more to-day,' he said wearily, 'and it is so delicious out here! Let us take a turn in the avenue and listen to those black-coated fellows. Hark! what is

that?' as the sudden pealing of bells broke on our ears.

'It is Mr. Leigh's thoughtfulness,' I cried breathlessly. 'Olga had told him, and he has just got the ringers together.'

'Do you mean it is for me?' looking quite scared.

'Yes, dear; it is in your honour. It is a welcome to the heir—the young squire of Brookfield. If they had known, Basil—if we had given them time—all your tenants would have been at the station to receive you. There would have been triumphal arches and flags; the Oddfellows, with their band; and the vicar—at least, the curate-in-charge—would have made you a speech.'

'Oh, Heaven forbid!' he returned, quite shocked at the idea. 'I could not have undergone it.'

I could not help laughing at his evident discomposure. With all his pride, he had not a spark of vanity; there was nothing little in his nature; his faults were big glaring faults, but there was no meanness.

'All the same, they will feel we have cheated them. We must have a supper and a dance for the tenants later on. You must not shrink from your responsibilities.'

'No,' he said softly; 'I must face every-

thing. How pleased Reggie will be with those bells!'

We were standing in the avenue. I do not know what impulse moved Basil to take off his hat and stand bareheaded and silent. There was a grave, reverent look on his face. 'Please God!' I heard him say, as though speaking to himself. My 'Amen' was inaudible.

I was obliged to leave him at last, and go up to Virginia. As I passed the library, Mr. Fleming came out. The library window commanded a view of the avenue—perhaps he had been watching us.

'Well,' he said, looking at me with a smile, 'is the Squire pleased with his ovation?'

'He seems rather upset by it all. I cannot get him to look over the house, or to pay attention to anything. We must leave him quiet for this one day.'

'His cup is filled to the brim—very little would make it overflow. You are right; we must leave him to get used to his position. I will go out to him, and tell him some Leeds news—any triviality that comes into my head.'

'I have been talking to him about Reggie's frocks.' He laughed at that, and we parted.

I found Virginia lying back on her easy chair, with her eyes closed, as though she, too, were listening to the bells. She seemed utterly

exhausted, and there was a dark look round her mouth ; but when she opened her eyes I almost started. In place of their wild, haunted look they had the happy restfulness of a child.

'Cathy, dear Cathy ! do you hear the bells ? They are ringing in Basil's honour—to welcome my boy to his home. Good Mr. Leigh ! I must thank him for this.'

'You are happy, Virginia ?' I asked softly, as I knelt down beside her, and looked into her sweet pallid face.

'Happy ! I am suffocated with happiness !' putting her hands to her breast. 'Do you know how I felt when he kissed me—the first kiss I have ever had from my child ? As though I could die with joy ! And when he told me to go and rest I felt then that I had a son.'

'He will be everything to you.'

'He is nobleness itself. There was not a word of reproach, and yet he owes all his unhappiness to his mother. Did you see how his face changed when he spoke of his wife ? He is terribly unhappy.'

'I fear he is.'

'I do more than fear it ; I am sure of it. There are lines in his face that tell their own story. Cathy, I must confess something : There was one moment when I shrank from him—

from my own boy—and that was when I saw his likeness to Paul.'

'I am afraid he noticed it.'

'He shall never notice it again; but for the moment it was so strong. There was the beautiful mouth and chin. Paul's were modelled like a Greek god's. I shut my eyes for an instant, and when I looked again it was still there—the likeness—only the expression was different; there was no cruel sneer on Basil's lips.'

'No, indeed!'

'I am glad he is not handsome; there was something diabolical in Paul's beauty. But his hand!—there again I had a fresh pang. Do you remember Paul's white, muscular hand and filbert-shaped nails? But, of course, you saw him so little. Basil has his father's hand.'

'You should not mind these things, Virginia.'

'I do not! I do not! but for the moment I was overcome. He is a grander man than Paul; and he carries his head like a king. To think my little child has grown into that! All this time I have been trying to thank God; but my heart is too full for words.'

'There are no words needed.'

'No; I just knelt upon the ground, and said nothing. But I think I never prayed so well. Cathy, I cannot be surprised at anything to-

day, or I think Mr. Fleming would have surprised me.'

'Did you recognise him, Vi?'—my old girlish name for her.

'Not in the least; but when you mentioned his name I said to myself: This is Catherine's Mr. Fleming. How gray he has grown!' looking at me a little curiously; 'but he is better looking now than he used to be.'

'I never thought of his looks.'

'I dare say not. How fond you were of each other in those old days! Ah, my poor father was cruel about that! You were never the same girl after Robert Fleming went away. I think no parent has a right to come between two people who love each other.'

'Perhaps not. I am of your opinion, Virginia; but, if you please, we will not talk of that old, old story. When you see him again you must talk to him about Basil. He is his boy as well as yours.'

'Yes, I know;' but I could see my words pained her. She would be very jealous of her son's love for others, I knew. I think this made her a little cold in her praises of Mr. Fleming. 'But he is a good man, and we owe him a debt of gratitude,' she finished. 'You must not let me be selfish, Cathy—if I could only overcome this jealousy!—but I cannot

bear to think that he took my place all those years.'

Poor Virginia! After all, it was not pure unalloyed happiness. The maternal instinct that had so long been starved and thwarted had to battle fiercely for its rights. Alas! who could give her back those lost years? After all, Basil was right when he decided that the past must be consigned to oblivion: to her dying day the mother's heart would cry out for the little child she had never seen. I tried to persuade Virginia to remain quietly in her room that evening, but neither Marsden nor I could induce her to listen to reason. Her son should not take his place at the head of the table unless she were there to see it. I sent for Basil at last, and at his first word she yielded.

'Mother,' he said almost abruptly, 'it would be impossible for me to eat my dinner if I saw you sitting at the table and looking ready to faint. If you will stay here quietly I will come up and talk to you afterwards.'

'But you will take your proper place, Basil?'

'Not to-night. I shall sit by Aunt Catherine. Why do we need this stiff formal dinner? I shall shock your servants: I have no dress-clothes. I ordered them this morning; but I have only my morning coat.'

'Bennet will understand. He is such an old servant. Catherine, remember to-morrow that my son is to be consulted at what hour he wishes to dine!'

'My dear mother——' in a protesting voice.

'You are master here, Basil. No one shall question your authority. Neither Catherine nor I will obtrude ourselves, my dear,' taking his hand timidly. 'Everything shall be as you wish it.'

'Your wishes will be mine, mother.'

'Let us go now, Virginia, and Basil shall come to you by-and-by. He has eaten nothing since he has entered the house;' and then she said no more.

I was anxious to get him away. He was looking nervous and uncomfortable again. I knew it pained him to see his mother so humble and submissive. It seemed to put them both in a false position. He spoke out this thought as soon as the door closed behind us.

'Aunt Catherine, you must give my mother a hint. I do not mean to put Aline in her place or yours. We are circumstanced strangely. It is not easy to define things. I will take my place, but Aline is not fit for hers. You will be just as much mistress here as ever. I don't fancy my mother comprehends the situation.'

'Perhaps not—nor, in truth, do I.'

'Things will shape themselves,' he returned in a melancholy voice, and then we entered the dining-room.

I saw a look of surprise flit over Bennet's face as Basil took the chair beside me, and Mr. Fleming seated himself opposite to him. As Reynolds handed the soup, I saw Basil look round the room at the carved antique furniture, the heavily-framed family portraits, the massive flagons and drinking-cups on the sideboard. The bells were still pealing, the rooks were cawing over the tree-tops, the room was sweet with roses and heliotrope, a great marble basket of hot-house flowers was in the centre of the table. I wonder why Basil looked at it all so gravely? Was he thinking of the bare pavilion? Of the cottage-room at Highgate? Of those midnight wanderings in Holloway? Of the parlour behind the shop? And now of the goodly heritage that was his? As I looked at him questioningly, a flash of his eyes answered me, and then I knew I was right.

As soon as coffee had been served, Basil went up to his mother's room, and I accompanied him to look at Reggie, who was sleeping in his father's room. I found he had taken the cat to bed with him—a large snow-white Persian, who went by the name of Peter. They

both looked so comfortable that I had not the heart to disturb them.

The summer twilight had closed in, and on my return to the drawing-room I found that Reynolds had already lighted the hanging-lamp, and the soft, warm light just irradiated the centre of the room. Mr. Fleming was standing under it with a book in his hand. At that moment I was conscious of a strange shock, a curious revulsion of feeling; a scene out of the long-closed past started up before me. Eight-and-twenty years ago he had stood just in that spot, when they had sent me in to bid him farewell! The swinging lamp, with its pink shade, was casting just the same glow over him, only it was early spring, and the room was full of warm firelight. Should I ever forget that evening? and how, when that miserable interview was over, he put me from him when, in my girlish passion, I would have clung to him?

'It is the will of God, Catherine,' he said gently, and then he left me.

As these thoughts flashed through my mind, Mr. Fleming raised his eyes and looked at me fixedly. I knew then the same recollection had occurred to him. He placed a chair for me, and stood beside me a moment.

'I can read your thoughts,' he said very quietly. 'You are remembering what neither

of us can ever forget. It is better to speak of it frankly—it is useless to try and ignore it Yes, it was here, in this room, that I passed the bitterest moments of my life. When I closed that door behind me I knew I was closing it on my hopes of earthly happiness.'

I could not control my voice sufficiently to answer him. He was standing just behind me, and it seemed to me as though it were the young Robert Fleming who was speaking.

'It took all my strength to give you up. I remember you made it very hard for me to leave you. Ah, well! we are middle-aged people now; we can bear to look back on the past pain. Time is a marvellous healer—is it not, Catherine?'

'Why have you never come to see me?' That question would rise to my lips in spite of myself. 'All these years your old friend has been forgotten.'

'You do not believe what you say,' he returned calmly, as he took the seat beside me. 'You have never been forgotten by me. No, I have not come—that is true; I had my reasons. But, all the same, I have seen you from time to time; I have assured myself that you were well and happy.'

'Mr. Fleming! what can you mean?'

'Forgive me if I do not answer you; a man must keep his own counsel sometimes. I have not seen you for years; the last time, I think, it was at St. Mark's.'

'You knew me! you recognised me!' but I was too much abashed to say any more. I felt myself blush like a girl—I, the middle-aged woman!

'I should know you anywhere;' and there was unmistakable tenderness in his voice. 'I preached well that night; I felt inspired, lifted out of myself, to know you were there listening to me. I wanted to speak to you, to tell you how grateful I was, but when I came into the church you had gone.'

'You could not be sure it was I,' I stammered. 'I had a thick veil.'

'If I had needed proof, it was given me. Do you remember this?'

He took out of his pocket a tiny prayer-book that looked very much the worse for wear; it was bound in Russian leather, and on the fly-leaf was written 'Catherine Sefton.'

'Why did you keep this?' I asked, as he took it out of my hand.

'Could I embarrass you by returning it?' was the answer; but I knew he was not telling me the real reason. I saw that by the conscious look on his face. 'I have had

it so long that I may as well keep it;' and he put it back in his pocket with a fine air of indifference.

'Your visit cheered me immensely,' he went on. 'I knew then that I had a friend and well-wisher as well as St. Mark's;' and as I started and again a painful flush suffused my face, he said very earnestly: 'Do you think I did not recognise our Lady Bountiful?—that I did not bless you in my heart as I expended those generous sums of money? If you only knew what a happiness it has been to act as your almoner! I felt then as though you and I were still working together.'

You and I! Oh, how cautious he was! But he had called me Catherine once.

'But, all the same, you never cared to come and see me.'

'I thought it better not'—in a low voice. 'Sometimes I used to wonder that you never married. Do you know you have refused a friend of mine—Beauchamp? But he comforted himself by taking a wife some ten years ago. I remember his coming to me, and telling me of his disappointment. He was a capital fellow.'

'You have not married, either.'

'I have never cared to do so;' but I fancy he looked reproachfully at me, as though I

might have left that unsaid. 'I had Basil, you see; I made him my chief interest in life.'

'You must have been lonely when he left you.'

'Yes, I was pretty lonely; I had got so used to him, I could tell the lad anything. It was a bad business for me when his wife manifested that strange jealousy of his friends—it separated us entirely: Basil begged me to keep away. If I had had any idea of the real cause of his misery I would not have obeyed him, but I never knew until a few weeks ago.'

'It was wrong of Basil not to tell you.'

'He could not bear for me to know; but, of course, it was a mistake. Never mind, I am not his only friend now: he has you and his mother to stand by him.'

We talked a little more on this subject—about Basil's meeting with his mother. He wanted to hear all about it; and when I had satisfied him, he said quietly:

'Never mind Basil now; you have told me all I wished to know; I shall hear the rest from himself. I want to know something on another subject. Will you tell me about yourself, and your sister, and the life you have led all these years? You do not know how much it will interest me.'

This was said so simply and kindly, and with

such an air of friendliness, that my troubled consciousness was soothed at once. The next minute I found myself talking to him as though he were my brother; and there was so much to tell—the tragedy of Virginia's home-coming—her despair and remorse—my father's death—and our solitary life in the old Hall. I described Virginia's strange seclusion—her morbid fits—the grief that threatened to prey upon her life. He looked at me anxiously.

'I had no idea of this—at least, I had not realized it; it must have tried you sadly—such a life!'

'I would not let it try me,' I returned quickly, for I did not wish him to pity me too much. It had been in his power to help me, and his foolish man's pride had kept him away. After all, men, even the best of them, are such cowards. 'I had plenty of work: I had Basil's property to manage; I became a woman of business; sometimes I went into society; now and then I entertained at the Hall—but that was dreary work without Virginia. By-and-by I had Olga to help me; I never felt dull when that dear child was with me.'

'Olga?—that is the young lady with the pretty voice. Yes, I liked the look of her; she has a sweet face.'

'Her nature is sweeter still; everyone loves

Olga ;' and then I stopped, for at that moment Basil came into the room.

He looked surprised to see me there.

'It is very late ; I thought you would have retired long ago, Aunt Catherine. I was obliged to remind my mother of the time. What a long day it has been !' rather wearily. 'I think I must bid you good-night now.'

'You are very tired, Basil !'

He gave me a queer glance.

'I think this day has been three days rolled in one—it has seemed endless. I suppose if we measured time by our feelings, I should have lived a month since I got up this morning. Good-night, Aunt Catherine ;' and then, for the first time, he kissed me—he seemed to do it naturally.

'Poor lad ! he is quite worn out,' observed Mr. Fleming. 'People who do not know Basil would not give him credit for such deep feelings ; but you and I know him better.'

'Yes, indeed. Good-night, Mr. Fleming.'

'Good-night'—and, detaining me a moment : 'Thank you for all you have told me this evening ; after all, we are old friends, Catherine.'

'I hope so.'

'And friends for life, too. Some folk think very lightly of friendship ; but you and I are

different sort of people. All these years I have called you my friend.'

'I am glad of that,' I returned soberly.

When I entered my room, with the candle still in my hand, I walked up to the pier-glass and gravely regarded myself from head to foot.

What did I see? A quiet, well-preserved gentlewoman, in a gray satin dress, with a figure that had not yet lost its girlish roundness, and brown hair, with here and there a thread of shining silver.

'So this is Robert Fleming's friend,' I said to myself—'his friend for life.'

But as I looked a sudden mist seemed to obscure the view; and as I turned away a great cloud of sadness seemed to envelop me, for I knew that I could not strip myself of my riches, and that they, and they alone, divided me from the tenderest and most faithful heart that ever beat in this world!

CHAPTER XV.

'THEY ASKED FOR THE SQUIRE.'

'You are shy and proud, like Englishmen.'
TENNYSON.

'God's goodness has been great to thee ;
Let never day nor night unhallow'd pass,
But still remember what the Lord hath done.'
Second Part of '*Henry VI.*'

JUST then there was a knock at the door, and Marsden entered ; the honest creature had come to unburthen her heart of a little of its gladness. She was warmly attached to her mistress ; with the exception of myself, no one understood Virginia so well. I used to marvel at her patience when Virginia was in one of her trying moods.

'This is a happy day, ma'am,' she began ; 'I never thought to see my mistress look as she does to-day. I could cry as I think of it, and of our fine young Squire who has come to his own.'

'I was sure of your sympathy with us, Marsden. I have been talking to Mrs. Larkins and Bennet, and they both say how pleased all the servants seem with the look of their new master. My sister has reason to be proud of such a son.'

'Oh, poor thing! and she is proud! She will just lie awake until morning thinking of him, and how he is sleeping under her roof to-night. It has been a trial for him, poor young gentleman! I will not deny that, meeting his mother for the first time as a full-grown man; but no one could have behaved better. "He has been goodness itself to me"—that was what she said to me just now.'

'Marsden, I want to ask you something, and there has been no opportunity. How did my sister take the news?'

'Do you mean when your letter came, ma'am, two days ago? Well, I was in my mistress's room, just attending to the flowers. I had given her the letter, and was thinking no more about it, when she suddenly called out, and I thought she was going to faint. One hears sometimes of folks who have died from a sudden joy that was too much for them, and I seemed to understand it when I looked at my mistress's white face.'

'Oh no!' I exclaimed, shocked at the bare

idea; 'I had prepared her so carefully in the previous letter.'

'All the same, it was too much for her. She seemed as though she were paralyzed at first; her poor hands shook so she could not hold the paper. I had to read the letter to her from beginning to end, and when I had finished she made me begin all over again; it did not seem as though she could take it in.'

'I wished afterwards that I had asked you to telegraph to St. Croix; I so dreaded the effect on her.'

'Well, after a bit she got calmer, and I gave her her composing-draught; and then she begged me to leave her alone for an hour. I was almost afraid to do it, seeing her so weak and upset; but she was very peremptory with me. I stood at the door for the best part of the time, and it was hardly on the stroke of the hour when I went back to her; and what do you think were her first words, ma'am?' and now there was a broad smile on Marsden's face.

'It is no use my trying to guess, Marsden.'

'No, ma'am; and I assure you I could hardly believe my ears: "What am I to wear, Marsden, when I receive my son?" and looking at me as anxious, too, as though the three kingdoms depended on my answer.'

'How unlike Virginia!' I murmured.

'It was the first time I ever heard such a speech from my mistress's lips, and I have lived close upon four-and-twenty years with her; and it put me in a nice pucker. There was only that old black velvet that had been put away in lavender for the last twelve years, and Rollston and I had a world of trouble remodelling it and making it fit to wear.' Rollston was our upper housemaid, who had always acted as my maid, for I was too independent in my habits to need a maid of my own.

'It really looked very well.'

'It did at a pinch; but my mistress, bless her dear heart! grumbled a good deal over it. This is really what I have come to consult you about; for last night my mistress said to me, "You must renovate my wardrobe. I must have some handsome dresses; I do not wish my son to be ashamed of his mother's appearance. You and my sister can talk over it, and then you can get me anything you and she think will be suitable." It was a bit vague, was it not, ma'am? but, there! my mistress is as impracticable in such matters as a child.'

'Never mind, Marsden; you and I will put our heads together. Let me see, if you will come to my room half an hour before luncheon to-morrow we will arrange it. There must be

a new velvet dress; I have made up my mind to that already—Mr. Basil has a fancy for velvet; and then, perhaps, a satin, and a rich black silk with jet trimmings—we will settle all that later on. I shall probably go to town in a day or two, and can call on the dressmaker—Hobart Place is only a step from Victoria.'

'That will be best. Now I must not keep you up any longer, ma'am,' and Marsden withdrew with a satisfied expression on her comely face.

The next morning, as I was finishing dressing, I heard Nix bark, and, looking out of my window, I saw Reggie, in his white sailor suit, running down one of the garden paths, with the pug waddling after him. The next moment the window next mine was thrown up, and 'Wait for me, old chap!' followed in Basil's voice. Reggie stopped at once, and planted his legs sturdily, as though nothing would induce him to move, while Nix ambled round him, heaving his fat little body and jingling his bells, with his foolish little tail curled up tightly after the manner of well-bred pugs.

I stood watching them until Basil came out of the house. The gray suit and little gray cap reminded me of La Maisonnette and the pavilion. It was always a pretty sight to see Reggie with his father. I like the way in which

Basil snatched him up, and, thinking himself unperceived, kissed him again and again before he hoisted him on his shoulder and marched off with him. They were going to see the peacocks, and the honeysuckle arbour, and Reggie's new garden. I knew how Basil would enjoy showing him all the sights. I am sorry to say that Reggie spoke of the peacocks in the most disrespectful way afterwards:

'Them ridiculous birds, what has trains like ladies,' he observed.

Basil seemed in excellent spirits at breakfast-time, and when afterwards I volunteered to show him the house, he consented on the condition that Reggie came too. This impeded our movements a little, as Reggie, who had developed a strong attachment to Peter, insisted on toiling after us with the huge creature tucked under his arm, until he was red in the face. I am not quite sure that Peter liked it—he was a cat of dignity; he escaped just as we were entering the Lady Gwendoline's Room, as it was still called; and I saw him licking himself on the window-seat in rather an irritable and injured manner.

'Do you think Aline would like this room? I asked presently; 'it is a very pleasant room, and with a little fresh cretonne, and a comfortable chair or two, it would make quite a pretty

boudoir. And it is so quiet, too; your apartments would be quite shut off from the rest of the house.'

'Where would Reggie sleep?' he asked rather anxiously. 'The nursery is too far away; I must have him near me.'

'He could sleep in your dressing-room, if you like; there is plenty of space. Yes, perhaps that is best. But, Basil, you have not answered me yet. Do you think Aline will like this room?'

'She would be hard to please if she did not. It is a very handsome room; those carved cabinets are beautiful. Has no one ever used it?'

'Not in my time. Virginia always preferred a front room, and hitherto I have sat in the library. I have always had so much writing to do, and it was more convenient for the tenants and servants; but, of course, that will be your room now.'

'But why need I banish you?' with a tinge of impatience in his tone; 'the library would hold a dozen people comfortably. Look here, Aunt Catherine, if I am to be master, I mean you to be mistress. You have got to coach me up in my duties, so we may as well begin to work together from the first.'

'But, my dear——'

'There is no "but" in the matter. I intend

to keep things as much as possible on their former footing. I suppose Aline must sit at the top of her own table; but I don't mean to make any other change. You talked a lot of rubbish at St. Croix about the Dower House, as you called it—as though I should allow my mother, in her delicate state of health, to go into that mouldy, fusty, disused wing. Why, the whole place smelt like a vault!'

'It has been so long shut up,' I returned—'ever since my grandmother's time. She and her two daughters inhabited that wing when my father married; I showed you their portraits in the billiard-room; they were your great-aunts, Alicia and Penelope. Of course, it must be thoroughly aired, and a great deal of painting and whitewashing will be necessary before the rooms can be used.'

'Perhaps so; but, as I do not intend to have them used, we may leave all that alone. My mother will remain in her own comfortable apartments; and as for you, if you are too proud or too unsociable to share the library with me, you might take possession of that pretty little morning-room downstairs;' and he so evidently meant what he said, and was so bent on his own way, that I dared not say another word; and, after all, the Lady Gwendoline's Room was most fit for Mrs. Basil Lyndhurst.

Reynolds came up just then, to tell us that Miss Olga and the two Mr. Leighs were talking to Mr. Fleming in the drawing-room. 'They asked for the Squire, and for you, ma'am.'

Basil coloured a little, perhaps at the word 'Squire.'

'We must not keep our first visitors waiting, must we, Aunt Catherine?' he said, and hurried me downstairs.

I knew how kindly Mr. Leigh would greet Basil—he had such a good heart! He wrung my hand in quite a feeling way as he congratulated me. 'I never was so surprised in my life,' he said; 'and I need not tell you how glad I am, both for you and Mrs. Lyndhurst!' and actually his spectacles were so moist that he had to take them off to wipe them. I am sure he shook hands three times with Basil. His own regret seemed to be that his wife had not been able to come with him that morning.

Jem, too, behaved very well. He was a little grave, perhaps a trifle distant, in his manner to Basil; but he was quite his old affectionate self with me; only he persisted in calling me Miss Sefton.

'But, Jem,' I protested, 'I like Aunt Catherine ever so much better.'

'I cannot help that,' with an accession of

gravity; 'it would not be good taste now, when you have a real nephew.'

'But Basil will not mind.'

'I should not think of asking him,' rather stiffly. 'I have been talking to Olga, and begging her to give it up too; but girls are so self-opinionated; she won't hear of calling you Miss Sefton.'

'I should think not!' indignantly. 'Olga is the last one to hurt my feelings.'

'Do you mean that you will be hurt?' and it was evident Jem's soft heart was relenting; unfortunately, at that moment Basil called me.

'Aunt Catherine, are we engaged for Saturday? is that the day we are going up to town? Mr. Leigh wants us to dine with him.'

I saw directly that Basil wished to accept the invitation, so I told him Monday would do very nicely for our expedition. Jem caught at my arm.

'Don't you understand how ridiculous it would be for me?' he said in a low voice; 'perhaps it does not matter for Olga; but for me——'

'Well—well, do as you like, my dear.'

But I was just a trifle hurt with Jem. He need not have made the difference in such a hurry. It looked—it certainly looked as though he were jealous of Basil. So, though he said a great many nice things to me, and made the

most friendly overtures to Reggie—whom he pronounced a 'jolly little chap'—I somehow felt as though Jem were not quite a success. I hinted at this to Olga, when all the gentlemen had betaken themselves to the stables—a part of the establishment Basil had not yet visited. We were waiting for Marsden, who had not yet finished dressing her mistress. Virginia's sleepless night had prevented her rising at her usual time. I thought Olga looked rather uncomfortable as I spoke.

'I am sure he is prejudiced against Basil.'

'Oh, I hope not! I trust not!' looking quite pained at the idea; 'but Jem, dear old fellow! has his peculiarities. He is a regular Briton, Aunt Catherine. He prides himself upon always being straightforward and above-board, as he calls it, and, as you know, he does so hate mysteries.'

'That is so foolish of Jem.'

'He will have it Mr. Basil is mysterious. You know how Jem will ask questions. I am sure he must have asked me at least five hundred last night! he will say over and over again that Mr. Basil ought to have told us about his wife from the very first. "By your own account you took him for a widower," he said very severely; "well, no fellow has any right to let a woman think that of him." It was very

tiresome and wrong of Jem, and great nonsense too, for of course he gave us no right to suppose such a thing; and why need he tell his family affairs to strangers?'

'I am glad you defended him, Olga.'

'Of course I defended him. I got quite angry with Jem at last. Hubert and Kitty were far nicer, as I told him. Oh, Aunt Catherine, I am sure you will be shocked when you see Kitty!'

'Is she so unwell?'

'She is more than that; she looks absolutely ill, and she has grown much thinner. Hubert does not see it a bit; when I spoke to him, he only said the heat had tired her, and that it was a mistake their going to Lowestoft; the place had not suited her.'

'Poor little woman! I must try and find time to see her this afternoon.'

'Oh, she sent you a message. I was to tell you how rejoiced she was to hear about Mr. Basil; she really cried when she talked about it, and she was so pleased to see me, and so were the children. I have only just come home in time to see Hugh. Hubert takes him to school to-morrow.'

'And the twins, and Wilfred, and little Florence?'

'Oh, they are all as well as possible! Mab

has certainly grown, and looks so pretty. Do you know, though I had got them all round me, I missed Reggie. Oh, here comes Marsden at last, and I must leave you to your business!'

I could not prevail on Olga to stay to luncheon.

Kitty was not well enough to be left, she said; and she knew Hubert and Jem would both like to remain.

I think the stables had thawed Jem; he was far more conversational on his return. Basil seemed to like him; but I noticed neither of them mentioned Oxford. After luncheon Jem started for a long walk with Mr. Fleming, Basil went up to sit with his mother, and Mr. Leigh took me across to Fircroft. I found Mrs. Leigh lying on a couch at the open window in the drawing-room. Olga was sitting by her, working. She certainly looked very weak and fragile. I noticed her cheek-bones were slightly prominent, and her eyes were larger and brighter. She was always a pretty little woman, though of late years she had had a worn, faded look. She greeted me most affectionately, and made me sit down beside her.

'I am so glad, dear Miss Sefton!' she whispered.

Her husband, who had not heard the whisper, interrupted her.

'Kitty has grown very lazy,' he said, in his cheerful way; 'she makes us all wait on her. I am head-nurse, and Mab and Jessie carry out my orders.'

'Hubert is right; I give them a great deal of trouble,' she returned rather sadly; and it struck me at once that she was depressed about herself.

Mr. Leigh had some parish work, and left us almost immediately; and a few minutes afterwards Harry Vivian came up to the window and challenged Olga to a game of tennis. Harry was a great favourite of mine; we all called him Harry; and, indeed, who could help liking such a bright, cheery young fellow? Long ago I had guessed the poor boy's secret, though I never mentioned the subject to Olga. If he had only been half a dozen years older—but he would never be on the same plane with her: he was only a good-looking boy, and Olga was a woman. I thought she put down her work a little reluctantly; she would rather have stayed with us.

'I am out of practice,' she remarked; 'but I will try one game, if you like. But I mean to walk back with Aunt Catherine.'

Mrs. Leigh looked after them.

'We are all so glad to get Olga back,' she said presently; 'the poor children have missed her so. Do you know, Hubert and I think she looks different, somehow. She is quieter. I noticed it last night, and put it down to the score of fatigue; but to-day she is even quieter. She is generally so full of spirits.'

'I think Jem was a little bit tiresome last night.'

'Do you mean about your nephew? I am afraid we none of us spared Olga. She was very good in answering all our questions. She has grown very pretty; Hubert said so last night.'

'I always thought Olga pretty.'

'Well, not exactly; it is more her expression,' returned Mrs. Leigh. 'Her features are not at all regular; but until last night I never thought her the least pretty.'

'Well, perhaps not. After all, pretty would apply to a doll. There is something better than mere prettiness in Olga's face.'

'I often wonder if she will marry,' she continued thoughtfully. 'I think she will. Hubert and I talk of it sometimes.'

'Of course she will marry!' quite indignantly; for the idea of my sweet Olga being an old maid was repellent to me. What, was she to go through life and never meet her other self?

'She has never liked anyone yet; I am sure of that. Olga is not like other girls. She would ask a great deal from the man she loved.'

As she spoke an odd thought flashed through me—a curiously painful thought. If Basil had been free, would he have cared for Olga? Would Olga have cared for him? I changed the subject hastily by questioning Mrs. Leigh about her health.

'If I were you,' I said seriously, 'I would consult a physician. Dr. Langham is very clever; but it is always more satisfactory to have a second opinion.'

'I wish you would tell Hubert so,' she returned anxiously; he thinks so much of what you say. I have never liked to propose it to him, for fear of frightening him. I am certainly not gaining ground this summer.'

'I wonder Mr. Leigh does not see that for himself.'

'Oh no! He will have it that it is only Lowestoft, and I shall soon get stronger. He was quite angry one day when I told him that I felt much weaker. He thinks it is my fancy'—and now there were tears in her eyes—'and that I do not make sufficient effort. I went out to pay some calls with him last week, and when I got home I fainted.'

'Mrs. Leigh, you must certainly speak to a physician at once. It would be the truest kindness to your husband; never mind if he thinks you fanciful.'

'I believe you are right. I wish I were not so cowardly with Hubert. I do so hate worrying him. If you knew how good he is to me!'

'I think everyone knows Mr. Leigh's devotion to his wife.'

She blushed very prettily.

'If I could only be well enough to help him as I used! it is such a trial having to lie here and do nothing. That is why I am so glad Olga has come back, because he will miss me less. She has always been such a comfort to us.'

We had a little more talk, and before I left Mrs. Leigh promised that she would ask her husband to take her up to London. I was not at all easy in my mind about her; her mother had died of decline, and one or two of her aunts. There was a wasted look about her, and her hand was so thin and light that it gave me a shock to touch it. Olga had finished her game, and she joined me at once. Her first question was about her sister-in-law—did I not think she looked ill?

'Very ill,' was my reply; and then I told her the piece of advice I had given. She seemed relieved to hear it.

'She shall go at once; that is a good idea, Aunt Catherine. I wish Kitty were not so afraid of telling Hubert things. In my opinion, husbands and wives ought to be perfectly frank with each other; but I dare say you will tell me I am not a good judge'—with a little laugh. 'But, then, Hubert is such a slow, stupid, dear old fellow; he never notices things like other people.'

'I don't know that,' was my unlucky response, but I repented the words as soon as I had spoken them. 'He told Mrs. Leigh that you were somehow different, and so much quieter, and she said the same.'

'Oh no, Aunt Catherine—not really,' in a tone of such distress that I looked at her in surprise. She was quite pale, and her lips were quivering, but she turned off her emotion with a laugh. 'Why, what nonsense! As though a person were never to be tired—and Jem so harassing too! I—I do not think I will come any farther, Aunt Catherine; it would be a pity to interrupt them—would it not?'

We were just by our gate as she spoke, and two people were coming slowly towards us. It was Virginia in her lace hood, pacing under the elms, supported by Basil's arm. Reggie was running on before them.

'How happy they look!' whispered Olga, as she left me.

But I did not answer her; I was too much absorbed in that picture. Could I have ever hoped to have seen that sight? Virginia was walking feebly, but her face was upturned. Basil was bending down to speak to her. I was almost sorry that Reggie saw me and pounced on me with a shout.

'I have brought my mother out into the sunshine; there is no tonic like fresh air, I tell her.' Basil still spoke with a sort of shyness and constraint, with something of formality, but the slight bashfulness sat well on him. 'Are you tired?'—looking down at her.

'No, my dear—no; you have such a strong arm, and it seems to support me so;' and then I took Reggie's hand and walked beside them, until the gong summoned us to the house.

CHAPTER XVI.

'SO YOU HAVE COME BACK!'

'Why, what's the matter,
That you have such a February face,
So full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness?'
'*Much Ado about Nothing.*'

'Shy she was, and I thought her cold.'
TENNYSON.

MR. FLEMING left us the next morning. I did not see him alone again, and our few parting words were exchanged in Virginia's presence. I thought he looked very grave, but he said he should soon see us again, as Basil had made him promise to pay us another flying visit early in November. I missed him sadly that evening: somehow, I felt sure that, as he sat in his lonely room that night, he was missing us too!

We dined at Fircroft on Saturday. On looking back on that evening, I am not quite sure that I regarded it as a success.

Basil was not perfectly at his ease. He looked very handsome in evening dress, but he showed his nervousness by being a little stiff. Olga, too, was unusually quiet; it struck me that Jem was keeping vigilant watch over her, and that she was aware of his surveillance. She seemed half afraid to talk to Basil, and her manner showed none of that soft friendliness that was natural to her. Perhaps Basil missed it, for I saw him looking at her once or twice in a puzzled way. Mrs. Leigh had made an effort, and took her usual seat at the dinner-table; I thought she looked far more fit for bed. Her husband seemed overjoyed to see her there.

'Why, this is like old times, Kitty!' he said; and all through dinner I could see him at intervals beaming on her through his spectacles.

I never saw a man more devoted to any woman. Mrs. Leigh's worn, sensitive face brightened into positive beauty as she caught one of these fond looks.

'She is picking up nicely now,' he said to me in a confidential whisper. 'It is a case of nerves. Kitty was always too finely strung. If she would only make an effort and pull herself together, she would get on.'

Poor Mr. Leigh! I had not the heart to undeceive him. Olga, who had overheard this

little speech, looked at me and shrugged her shoulders rather sadly. We were not a very lively party; I think the young men were a little overawed by Basil's stiffness, which most likely they mistook for haughtiness. I was not surprised on our return to hear Basil say that he had not enjoyed himself much. He liked Mr. Leigh exceedingly, and Mrs. Leigh also.

'What a pretty little woman she would be,' he said, 'if she were not quite so thin and unsubstantial-looking! And I like that nice-looking fellow, Vivian; the other two men are sticks.'

'And Jem?'

'Oh, Jem is a bit stand-offish. I don't know quite what to make of him. He seems a nice fellow enough, but he keeps his sister too much in order.'

'He is devoted to her, really.'

'Oh yes, I dare say. Shall I light your candle for you, Aunt Catherine? What a pretty dress that is! You cut them all out this evening.'

But though he smiled in his old manner as he paid me that little compliment, I could see Basil was not in his usual spirits.

Sunday was better. Basil and Reggie and I went to church in the morning, and I felt very happy and grateful. I was sure from Basil's earnest, devout manner that he was grateful too.

After evening service we took Olga back

with us. Jem was not at church, and after supper she sang to us all our favourite hymns. Basil was still a little quiet, but Olga seemed more like herself, and the evening passed very pleasantly.

The next morning we took an early train up to town. Basil had to interview his tailor and bootmaker, and I spent a couple of hours in a quiet street leading out of Eaton Square discussing materials and fashions with our dressmaker, Miss l'Estrange. I am quite sure that I never took such interest in my own dresses as I did in Virginia's, and as Miss l'Estrange was quite as interested, I felt we had done a good morning's work when I had finished.

It was nearly two o'clock when Basil and I met for a hasty luncheon. He complained that he had not done half his business, and that he should have to run up to town again in a day or two. He seemed tired and worn, and gave me such curt answers that I left off questioning him. I knew the approaching interview with his wife was making him gloomy.

There was no time to be lost. So we jumped into a hansom, and drove as quickly as possible to King's Cross. Basil's tongue did not unloose until we were in the train, and then he said rather quickly:

'I do hate myself for being such a coward!

If I had not been such a fool, you might have been sitting comfortably in the library at this present moment.'

'But I prefer to be where I am, thank you.'

'Oh, you say that just to make me feel better about things. Of course you never think of yourself, but, all the same, I ought to have thought for you. Why need I have brought you to such a place?' with an air of intense disgust. 'You have never been used to it. I ought to have remembered that.'

'Nonsense,' I returned, laughing. 'I have been in much worse places. Don't trouble about my feelings, Basil; I am only thinking how I can best help you. I want Aline to look on me as her friend. That is why I have come with you—that she may know how ready we are to welcome her.'

But as Basil said no more, and only looked excessively gloomy, I thought it better to be silent too; for there are some moods of unhappy self-consciousness when even the faintest touch of sympathy seems to bruise.

In a few minutes we were walking down the Holloway Road. Basil said we had only a few hundred yards to go. He stalked by my side like the knight of the rueful countenance. I felt rather nervous and depressed myself. I could not help thinking of the weary months

our poor boy had spent among these humble surroundings, and of the miles of pavement his restless feet had traversed night after night.

'This is the place,' he said, so abruptly that I started. Before us was a little corner shop, with a fine display of flowery Pekoe and fragrant Bohea in one window, and heaps of plums and currants, ornamented with citron and candied fruits, in the other, and 'George Barton' in gilt letters over the door.

There were no customers in the shop, only a small sandy-haired man, with a shrewd, comical sort of face, looking over a ledger in the little desk. I guessed this was Mr. Barton before Basil went up to him and held out his hand.

'Are you surprised to see me, George?'

'Well, I am a bit,' looking at me rather curiously. 'Allie never told me she expected you. She is in there,' jerking his head in the direction of the parlour. 'When did you get back, Fleming?'

'When did I arrive in England, do you mean? Last Tuesday; but I couldn't come before—I couldn't really, George,' in a deprecating voice as Mr. Barton looked at him rather sharply. 'I have a lot to tell you—and Aline; we had better go inside. You will be wondering whom I have brought with me. This is my aunt, Miss Sefton.'

The little man ducked to me.

'Your servant, ma'am,' he said civilly; 'I had no idea Fleming had a relative in the world. Go to Allie, there's a good chap, and I'll join you as soon as Smith can take my place—he is only changing a cheque for me—and then you can tell us all your news.'

He spoke so heartily and kindly that he prepossessed me in his favour; but oh, my poor boy! no wonder you ran away from it all.

'Come along, Aunt Catherine,' observed Basil in a low voice, and I followed him into a neat, cheerful little parlour.

Even in that instantaneous glance I saw there were plants in the window, and some nicely-arranged flowers on the small round table. A great black cat was sleeping in a cushioned chair; and someone—Aline, of course—was busy over some white work by the open window. She dropped it as we entered, and looked at us in extreme surprise as she rose; and, good heavens! what a beautiful face!

'So you have come back, Basil!' she said coldly, and without taking any notice of me. 'I think you might have written to tell us when to expect you.'

'I wanted to surprise you,' he said, with an attempt at playfulness as he kissed her.

I noticed she turned her cheek to him and received his caress reluctantly.

What a grand-looking woman! I thought of Basil's idyllic description of her in the harvest-field, when she had first taken his fancy; and I could not but own that many a man might have lost his heart to her.

She looked older than I expected—older than Basil—and her figure was large and matronly; but the small classical head, with its smooth glossy plaits, was just as he described it to me, and so was the pure, clearly-cut profile. The large, dark eyes had a strange penetrating sadness in them; only the chin and jaw was a little heavy and sullen-looking.

Basil did not seem to notice his chilling reception; perhaps he was too well used to it.

'Don't you wonder who this lady is, Aline?' he asked, with a sort of forced friendliness. 'I am going to give you and George another surprise. I have found some relatives, and this is one of them, my Aunt Catherine—Miss Sefton, I mean.'

'And I have come with Basil to be introduced to his wife,' I interposed hurriedly. 'My dear, I hope you and I will be very good friends in the future.'

But though I took her hand and pressed it

kindly she made no sort of response; only a hard look came over her face.

'I suppose Basil has told you so much about me that you are anxious to make my acquaintance,' she said, with a sort of veiled sarcasm. And then, with a complete change of manner, and dropping my hand, 'Where's Reggie, Basil?'

'He is at the Hall—I mean, I haven't brought him. I thought'—rather awkwardly—'you would come and see him instead.'

'You haven't brought him?'—and now there was a stormy light in her eyes. 'You have kept him away from me all this time, and now you have left him behind! That is the way you always treat me! But of course Reggie is nothing to me.'

'Come, come; you aren't quarrelling with your chap already, are you, Allie?' observed her brother, who had overheard her last words. 'Fleming says he has a lot to tell us; most likely he has some object in leaving the kid behind. You see,' turning to us, and rubbing his hands apologetically, 'Allie has been missing him pretty badly all this time; it is natural she should have a mother's feelings. I think the better of her for that, so we won't blame her. Give the lady a seat, Fleming, and take one yourself. Allie will be right

enough when she knows what you have got to tell her.'

But, as though to contradict this soothing statement, Aline resumed her work without putting another question, leaving Basil to begin his story as best he could. But I saw she listened to every word; and as he mentioned his mother she drew a long breath and looked up at him. He intercepted the glance at once.

'Are you glad I have found my mother, Aline?' he asked gently.

'I don't know; I haven't seen her yet'—evasively.

'But you might be glad, for my sake,' he persisted; but as she made no answer he went on with his story.

I saw her start and change colour when he mentioned Reggie's illness, though he passed over it very lightly; but she did not interrupt him once, though Mr. Barton kept up a running commentary in a sort of crescendo, which became more shrill as Basil described his home.

'Well, I am jiggered!' was his observation at this point.

I felt the expression needed translation to render it intelligible, and he rubbed up his sandy hair until it seemed to bristle. Mr. Barton's excitement seemed to communicate it-

self to Aline—she looked less statue-like. After a moment she laid down her work.

'Are squires very rich, Basil?'

'I don't know, my dear,' evidently delighted to find she would speak to him. 'I cannot answer for other squires, but Aunt Catherine tells me I have a large fortune.'

'Oh! you will be happy then,' she said, still looking at him. 'Our poor life has never suited you; you have not been brought up to it, as George and I have. You will get on better with your fine friends.'

'Why, you talk as though I were going to leave you behind! only I know you don't mean it. Aline, you should just see Reggie feeding the peacocks—it is quite a picture! Aunt Catherine is going to order him a velvet suit; just fancy how he will look running over the lawns and pulling the flowers!'

She seemed to listen to him breathlessly—her lips parted—her eyes softened.

'And there is such a beautiful room for you, Aline—they call it the Lady Gwendoline's Room—full of such lovely things; and I shall be able to buy you all you want—silk dresses, furs, lace, anything you fancy—and my mother is keeping some jewellery for you: you were always fond of pretty things.

'But I am not thinking of them now,' arching

her long neck with a gesture of disdain, and looking handsomer than ever. 'I am not a child to be bribed into good behaviour by pretty things; the question is'—and here her voice faltered—'wouldn't you rather have me stop here along with George, than be shaming you before your fine friends?'

There was no mistaking the anxiety with which she waited for his answer.

'Why should you shame me?' he returned impatiently. 'Why should we not begin all over again? We have made a mess of things—I will not deny that. I have not been the best of husbands to you, Aline; and there have been times when you have forgotten yourself. But if you will only make a fresh start, I am willing to overlook the past; a man cannot say more than that.'

Poor Basil! he meant well; but if he had only been a little softer with her! But I suppose he could not help his stern manner.

'I am sure Fleming—I beg his pardon, Lyndhurst—is speaking fair and proper, Allie; and there is no call for you to be so stand-offish with him. You are his wife; remember that.'

'I am not likely to forget it, George,' she returned, with a proud sort of humility. 'No, you cannot say more than that, Basil; I did

not expect to hear you say so much, after the way I have behaved. If you mean what you say, and you are willing to have me to live with you—— But there,' interrupting herself, 'I will make no promises—I have broken too many already—only I will try my best not to disgrace you.'

She held out her hand to him as she spoke; it was a large well-shaped hand, but showed traces of work. There were tears in her eyes, but I do not think Basil saw them.

'Then that is settled, my dear,' he said kindly enough; but I wished he had kissed her—I think she expected it, for she sighed in a disappointed way as she withdrew her hand.

'Come, this is first-rate,' exclaimed Mr. Barton, rubbing up his hair again. 'Allie had always the makings of a lady in her, and I shall be proud and happy to see her in her right place. Not but what I shall miss you,' looking at her wistfully. 'You and me have always been comfortable together, and the place will be a bit dull without you; but I have no call to think of that. When shall you want her, Lyndhurst? that is the next question.'

'Had she not better come back with us to-night, Basil?' I asked. 'There is no need for any preparation.'

I thought Basil seemed disturbed at my question; but a moment's reflection made him think better of it.

'Yes, why not? You have not much packing to do, have you, Aline? You might put up a few things, and let George send the rest; besides, I can get you all you want.'

'To-night?—come back with you to-night?' and Aline certainly looked frightened; but her brother gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

'You had better strike when the iron's hot; there is nothing like getting a thing over. Yes—yes; go with your husband, Allie, and be a good girl, and he'll be proud of you yet.'

'Can I help you, my dear?' I said in a low voice; but she shook her head.

'There is not much to do, and Becky is used to help me. Basil,' rather timidly, 'would not Miss Sefton like some tea? The kettle must be boiling by now.'

'That's an excellent idea!' interposed her brother, without waiting for Basil to answer; 'I guess we are all pretty dry, talking so long. Just you hurry up, Becky, there's a good lass. Why,' with a laugh of intense enjoyment, 'to think of my ordering about the Squire's lady in this fashion! but you will look over it, Allie, won't you?'

'I wish you would not talk such nonsense!' she returned rather crossly, as she left the room. Certainly Mrs. Basil Lyndhurst had not the most angelic temper in the world; but when she returned, a few minutes later, all traces of sullenness had vanished. I watched her with pleasure as she helped the rough maid-of-all-work to set the table. All her movements were slow, but graceful. She did not seem conscious of my observation; but more than once I saw her raise her dark eyes, and fix them on Basil in a curiously searching manner; but she scarcely spoke as she poured out tea, except to ask her brother once to pass the tea-cake to me.

Directly tea was over she went upstairs, and, after a few minutes, Basil followed her. I think he wanted to give her a hint or two about her dress. The moment we were left alone, Mr. Barton edged his chair a little nearer to me in a confidential manner.

'I am more glad than I can say, ma'am,' he began respectfully, 'to see that there is a chance of those two coming to a better understanding. I don't mean to blame one more than another. Allie has given Fleming a lot to bear; but if he had only been a little more patient with her!'

'Has she—has Aline been going on better lately?'

'Oh, I see you know all about it,' frowning

anxiously. 'I suppose Fleming—bah! I can't get used to the new name; Lyndhurst, I mean—has told you? Yes, it is a bad job for both of them—these breaks-out of Allie's; but she has not had one for months. I do believe she is ever so much better, poor girl! She struggles and prays against her temptation; but at times it seems as though the devil were too strong for her. Her mother died of it, you see—not that Allie knows that—that makes me not quite so hard on her.'

'But can nothing be done?'

'You must never let her taste anything stronger than tea or coffee,' he returned earnestly. 'Why, I never touch a drop of beer even before her. Keep her amused and happy, and give her a word of praise now and then, just to let her see you are pleased with her, and you will soon see what Allie is. She has done a deal of fretting lately after Fleming and the boy; it is a sore point with her, that neither of them needs her. I was fearful that she would go wrong with brooding over it; but no, she has kept herself straight.'

'I am afraid you will miss her, Mr. Barton?'

'Well, ma'am,' in an odd, choked voice, 'you are right about that. Allie is just the apple of my eye. She has been my girl, you see, ever since father and mother died, and I won't deny

it will be a bit dull for me; though, as her husband has the best right to her, I am not going to complain as long as he makes her happy.'

'Do you think she wishes to come with us?'

'That is a difficult question, ma'am. She is sickening for a sight of the child, and she is proud of being invited so kindly by her husband; but, in her heart, I expect Allie is mortally afraid. It is going among strangers, you see; and then she has never been used to grandeur; it will be kind of queer to her, having a livery servant to stand behind her chair.'

'Oh, she will soon get used to that.'

'If you would only be her friend, and teach her what to do!' he went on, looking at me so wistfully that I was quite touched. 'You see, Allie has never had a woman friend, and Becky, though she is invaluable, has been a bit rough with her. Now, a lady like yourself will be different, and if you can only get an influence over my poor girl——!'

'I will try my best—I will indeed, Mr. Barton; and my sister will be good to her, too.'

'Thank you kindly. Then I will not fash myself overmuch. You will not be expecting too much of the lass? Allie is no talker; even with me she is mostly silent; but she knows how to make a house comfortable.'

'I am glad to know that.'

'Why, she has the cleverest fingers in the world!'—warming into animation. 'You should just see the set of shirts she has made for me! You would not wish to see better work. And she is industrious, too—never a moment idle, except when she is in one of her bad states, and then she will sit and do nothing for the hour together. Why, the cakes and pies she makes would astonish you! And she keeps the place as tidy as a new pin. Miss her!'—rather grumpily—'ay, and Becky will miss her, too, for all the trouble she gives both of us when she is in her tantrums.'

We were interrupted at this moment, for Basil came back, and a few minutes afterwards Aline followed him. She was dressed for walking, and looked very nice. There was no fault to be found in the gray gown, and hat bound with a darker shade of gray velvet. I thought from her appearance that she had been crying.

'You have not been long getting ready, Allie.'

'No,' she said quietly, as she buttoned her gloves; 'I had not much to do. Basil would hardly let me take anything. He says my clothes are not grand enough for Brookfield Hall, and that he must buy everything fresh, so I have only got my blue cashmere besides this.'

'Never mind, my dear,' I interposed cheerfully; 'you and I will come up to town and order all you require.'

'Shall I be able to come and see George too?' she asked anxiously.

'Now, you are not going to trouble your head about me,' returned her brother affectionately. 'Becky and I will do first-rate together; shan't we, Becky?'—as she stood in the doorway, looking on rather grimly. 'There! you are ready now, so give us a kiss, and don't keep Fleming waiting.'

'I don't half like leaving you, George,' she said, putting up her face to be kissed. 'No one is half so good to me as you are. I doubt but I shall repent it.'

'Come, you might have paid me a prettier compliment,' observed Basil good-humouredly. 'Good-bye, George! I will bring Aline back to see you.'

He took hold of her arm, and hurried her away, as though he dreaded a longer leave-taking.

Mr. Barton followed us to the door of the shop, and watched us disconsolately as we seated ourselves in the cab Becky had procured. As we drove off, Aline leaned forward and waved her hand to him.

'Good-bye, dear old George!' she said un-

steadily; and a great tear rolled down her cheek. 'Are you sure you will take me to see him, Basil?'

'Quite sure, my dear!'

'Yes; but he will not be welcome at Brookfield Hall. George will never come and see me there,' she added sorrowfully; and to this Basil made no answer.

END OF VOL. II.

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